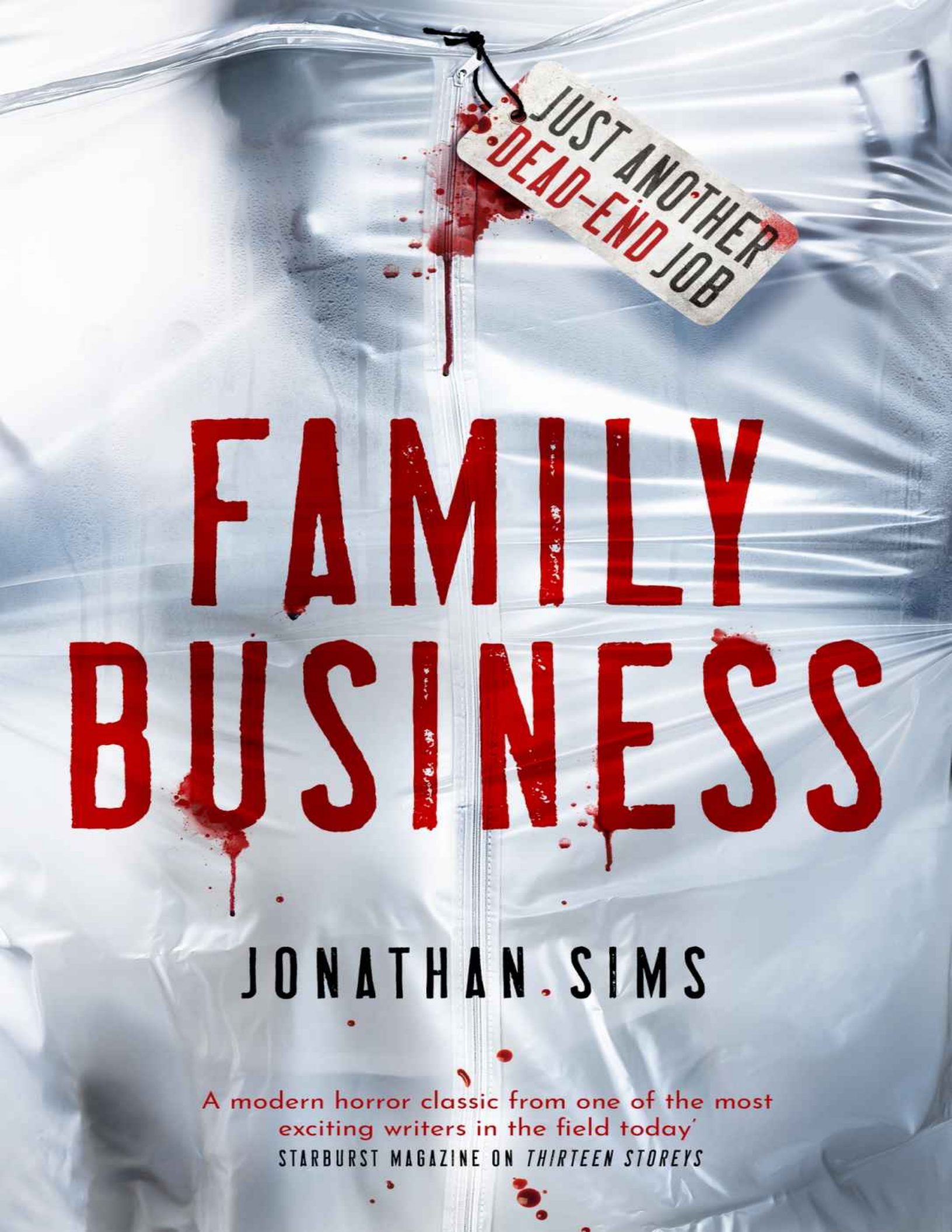

FAMILY BUSINESS

JONATHAN SIMS

A modern horror classic from one of the most exciting writers in the field today'
STARBURST MAGAZINE ON *THIRTEEN STOREYS*

To Frank,
My best friend (regardless of what they say)

FAMILY BUSINESS

Jonathan Sims

Contents

Dedication
Title Page

1: *The Crayford Road Job*
2: *Detritus*
3: *Angie*
4: *The White Lion Job*
5: *Traces*
6: *Dinner*
7: *The Cottage Grove Job*
8: *Hazards*
9: *Check-Up*
10: *The Hobury Street Job*
11: *Home*
12: *George*
13: *Connections*
14: *The Greenwich Park Job*
15: *History*
16: *The Trelawney Estate Job*
17: *Confrontation*
18: *The Priory Court Job*
19: *Frank*
20: *Mr Bill*

Epilogue: *The Slough Family Job*
Credits
Also by Jonathan Sims
Copyright

1

The Crayford Road Job

We do not disappear after death. Small pieces of our being can remain, persisting in those places that were once so meaningful to us. These traces can be found where we lived or loved or worked, and will linger especially where we died. They stand as a testament to a life; stubborn reminders that call out to those who know how to spot them and scream *I was here! I will not be forgotten!*

Luckily, there are many extremely effective bleach-based or enzymatic chemical products that can be used to clean them away. So many products, in fact, that as Diya Burman found herself heading back out to the van yet again to find no-the-other-yellow-bottle, she silently wished the human body didn't have quite so many types of fluid in it.

She pulled her mask down as she stepped out of the narrow house and took in a deep lungful of the brisk morning air. It could hardly be called fresh, scented as it was with traffic from the nearby Holloway Road, but Diya had lived her whole life in London and was used to it. Besides, it was certainly a refreshing change from the atmosphere inside. Now she just needed to get used to how conspicuous she felt in her Tyvek coveralls. When she'd first put them on, crisp and white, she had worried about how bright they were, standing out against the dull brick of the nearby houses. Now they weren't so white anymore, and her self-consciousness had shifted to the stains and spatters that covered them. Diya hoped it wasn't too obvious exactly what they were.

She opened the van's back door and sorted through an array of brightly coloured bottles and jugs, the labels of which had long since peeled away, haphazardly tossed into buckets. Who organised things like this? How was

anybody supposed to find anything? Especially when so many of the items were just faintly fluorescent liquids in unmarked plastic jugs. Diya lingered for a moment with that spike of annoyance, almost enjoying the sharp emotion that managed to pierce the grey fog that had settled in her chest these past few months. When she'd first agreed to take the job, it had been hard to see any way out, but maybe it would turn out irritation was her path out of grief.

It was the sort of thought that would have made Diya smile once.

How long had she been standing here, staring at these bottles? She tried to focus. As disheartening as she was already finding the new job, the idea of getting fired on her first day was enough to shake her out of the fugue. She'd just have to view the well-worn jumble in the back of the van as something that felt reassuringly practical; a marker of a company so comfortable and experienced in their task that they didn't need the crutch of neatness or organisation. Yeah, that almost felt plausible.

The correct yellow bottle, a particularly virulent-looking detergent, turned out to be hiding behind one of the ladders, but was easy enough to grab once she spotted it. She slammed the door shut, words locking into place to complete the name emblazoned across the back in black, sans serif script: SLOUGH & SONS. And in slightly smaller letters underneath: A CLEAN BREAK. Diya's chest ached as she read it again. She'd left so much of her life behind, but even so, she only had this job because of Angie. A final gift, of a sort.

A man in a suit hurried past towards the tube station. Commuter time already? How long had she been out here? Diya hurried back inside. She hoped Xen hadn't noticed how long she'd taken. She hoped *Frank* hadn't noticed.

As it was, she needn't have worried. Xen didn't even look up as Diya placed the bottle among the other chemicals currently being worked into a profoundly stained sofa. Xen nodded her head to the beat as the tinny sound of 'vintage' *Napalm Death* spilled from her headphones. Diya tapped her on the shoulder and pointed silently to the yellow bottle.

'Awesome, cheers!' Xen shouted over the death metal bleeding into her ears. 'That stuff's pretty lethal, though, so let's leave off 'til after I've had a smoke.'

‘Oh, OK. Is it flammable or—?’

Diya realised her friend couldn’t hear a word she was saying. The bottle didn’t seem to have any fire warnings, although it did show a picture of a very dead fish.

Xen pulled back the hood from her bodysuit and put her headphones around her neck. Diya always expected a mane of brightly coloured hair to spill out whenever she did this but, as Xen had told her with some bitterness, there were no wigs allowed on a job, so instead her close-cropped brown hair stood in muted contrast to the dark eyeshadow and intricate tattoo that crept up her throat. She tugged down her dust mask and lit up a long, black cigarette.

‘Sorry, what were you saying?’ Xen took a theatrical drag, expelling smoke from her nostrils.

‘Is that allowed?’

Diya knew the answer even before Xen’s lips turned up in a sardonic smile.

‘Hey,’ Xen took another long puff for emphasis. ‘If the only smell left in this place once we’re done is tobacco, I reckon we’ve probably done a decent job. So quit worrying so much; my dad’s not going to fire you. Relax.’

‘Sure thing.’

Diya couldn’t get the words to sound even vaguely convincing. She wanted to be like Xen Slough, completely herself, confident even when correcting people (‘it’s a z sound, like Xavier’), but this was a whole new world to her, and she hadn’t been the most forthright of people even before she was hired to clean up after the dead.

Xen threw herself back onto the sofa, contemplating the dark patch that didn’t seem much better than it had when they started, and Diya instinctively squirmed at the sight of someone sitting on the awful thing.

‘Don’t think this one’s getting clean,’ Xen said, ignoring her reaction.

‘I thought it would need to be incinerated anyway?’

‘Nah. You only actually *need* to do that to something that’s got dead guy goo on it, and the old lady died in the bed. I mean, I wouldn’t want to keep this thing, but the landlord was pretty clear he wanted the furniture saved if possible.’

‘So the sofa’s not … That isn’t, uh, biological?’ Diya asked.

‘Dunno. Don’t think so.’ Xen’s eyes flicked to a set of shelves above the sofa.

There were five of them, screwed haphazardly into the walls and now sagging and bowed under the weight of dozens and dozens of sealed glass jars. Each was filled with a thin and murky liquid coloured somewhere between yellowish green and brownish black, which obscured whatever the contents might have been. Diya tried not to stare too hard at them. Within one jar, white globules that might have been ancient pickled eggs seemed to follow her, while what might have been decades-old spinach pressed against the glass of another like sodden strands of hair. There was a single conspicuous space where at some point one of them had clearly fallen onto the sofa, and the wood was discoloured with old drippings. She remembered her mother talking about Aunt Sala’s old house and wondered if it had been anything like this.

‘What’s in them?’ Morbid curiosity climbed up her spine. ‘Is it food? Why aren’t they in the kitchen?’

‘Hoarders,’ Xen said, as she exhaled again. ‘Who the hell knows?’

The tone of disinterest wasn’t malicious, but it still sliced through Diya like a razor, and she felt herself deflate.

‘Well then, wouldn’t it make more sense to start with the jars? Get rid of them first in case another one falls?’

There was a long pause before Xen answered.

‘Yeah, maybe,’ she said, clearly trying to sound like she’d already considered it. ‘But the thing is that, uh, the order of disposal is—’

‘Dad said you couldn’t smoke inside on jobs anymore.’ Mary’s voice came from the next room, cutting off the half-hearted explanation. Xen couldn’t hide her relief, although the tone of Mary’s voice immediately made Diya feel like an accomplice.

‘No, he didn’t,’ Xen called back. ‘Or is he going to start smoking his pipe on the kerb?’

Mary Slough stood in silence in the doorway, her face almost entirely concealed behind facemask, goggles and hood.

‘It’s disrespectful.’

‘Who to? The half-melted old lady we scraped up in the bedroom?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is it going to anger all them ghosties?’ Xen needled, eyes searching for a reaction.

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’ Mary’s tone was level, but sincere. Diya hadn’t talked to her much since getting the job, but there was an intensity to her. Xen and Frank clearly didn’t take it too seriously, but it unnerved Diya slightly.

‘Fuck the dead.’

Xen didn’t say it loudly, but Diya jumped ever so slightly. Whatever Mary’s reaction was, it didn’t make it through the layers of protective clothing, and she turned and walked away.

‘Sorry.’ Xen turned to Diya a bit sheepishly. ‘Probably too harsh. Just don’t want her creeping you out with all her nonsense right out the gate, you know?’

‘It’s all right. I get it.’ Diya faked a smile. ‘First time we hung out it took her five minutes to bring up astral projection.’

‘Yeah, but it’s worse on jobs. She gets really into the whole “lingering spirits” thing. I mean, it’s not like Dad can fire her, but it doesn’t exactly make things easier. George used to indulge her a bit more, but—’

Xen stopped herself short, cutting off the emotion before it had a chance to reach her voice. The Sloughs weren’t ready to talk about George yet.

‘I mean, it does make a kind of sense.’ Diya tried to move on. ‘Frank—uh, your dad’s been doing this since you were kids, right?’

‘And his father, and his father’s father before him …’ Xen said, putting on a thick faux-Yorkshire accent.

‘I just mean she grew up around death. That’s got to leave its mark.’

‘I don’t know what you could possibly mean.’ Xen took a final drag on her Sobrani Black Russian, smoke pouring over her dark lipstick as she exhaled with a flourish.

‘Yeah, my mistake.’ Diya raised an eyebrow.

Xen smiled, the glint of a silver ankh on a black lace choker just visible below her coveralls as she stubbed out the cigarette on a pile of mildewed books.

‘I can’t believe you’re calling my family a bunch of weirdos.’

‘If the coffin fits.’

Xen let out a guffaw of laughter and leapt up from the sofa. Diya found it hard not to smile as well. She hadn’t known Xen long but her new friend

had proved herself the only one regularly able to get through the numbness that dogged her.

There was a moment of stillness as the laugh died away, and all at once the claustrophobic air of the cluttered living room pressed in again. The scent of something sweet rotting beneath the piles of old newspapers seemed to reach into the back of Diya's nostrils even through her mask, and she only just stopped herself from gagging, turning it into a throat-clearing cough. Xen's hood and mask were already back on and she was halfway up a stepladder, taking down jars.

Diya tried to shake off the sudden oppressive feeling. Xen had warned her how tough the job could be. But she'd needed something that was physical, something more real than "Digital and Market Communications Lead" – a job that had been pushing her to a breakdown even when Angie was still alive. And it didn't come much more real, much more physical, than this.

'What, uh, what shall I do now?'

Xen shrugged, not turning round. 'Ask my dad. I'm sure he'll have something. Not like there isn't plenty to do.'

'Right.'

Diya did her best not to let her voice reflect the drop in her stomach. She made her way around the piles of clothes that lined the corridor, poking her head around each door in turn, squinting past piles of old plastic milk jugs and piles of yellowed magazines, telling herself that she wasn't relieved whenever it turned out the room behind them was silent. As she got closer and closer to the bedroom, though, that relief turned to apprehension. Was he going to be in there, where the woman had died? Would Diya have to try and keep her focus on her boss as that wet and awful bed waited behind him? Then she opened the door to something that looked like a study and there he was.

Frank Slough's coverall was the same stained white as all the others, but he was broad enough that even with his back to her there was no mistaking him. He was standing in the middle of the room, in a clearing near a heap of rusted-shut suitcases, making notes on a clipboard and mumbling to himself.

'Excuse me, Mr S— uh, Frank?' It felt awkward, given how short a time she'd known the man, but that's what he had told her to call him.

He turned slowly to face her. His bushy grey moustache wasn't completely contained by the nose-piece of his mask, so his small eyes seemed to stare at her from behind a wiry nest of hairs.

'Yeah?' His voice wasn't exactly unfriendly, but it seemed willing to become so if he deemed it necessary.

'Xen, uh … She said she didn't need my help at the moment. Is there anything else you need me to do?'

Frank inhaled deeply, as though taking in the whole room, then opened his arms and gestured to pretty much everything.

'It all needs doing,' he said, dismissing her.

'Right,' Diya said quickly. 'It's just—'

'Hm?' He turned back around and she found herself looking at the floor, reluctant to make eye contact. She tried to collect her thoughts and speak clearly. Yes, it was her first day, but she was thirty years old and she was done being cowed by grumpy managers.

'Look, I don't really know how to do this yet. Xen is fine solo and Mary's doing the bedroom, which she said earlier was "too complicated" for me to learn yet. I know it all needs doing, but a bit of guidance would be really appreciated.'

Diya took a breath. The silence stretched out longer than it should have. Then Frank nodded at a large nylon bag in the corner. It was coloured safety orange and, when she opened it, Diya was presented with a huge number of Ziploc bags of all shapes and sizes.

'Next of kin want to make sure we send through anything valuable, but don't fancy digging through it themselves. Find anything worth not dumping and bag it up. Mark if it needs a deep clean of its own.'

His dismissal this time was final. Diya hoisted the surprisingly heavy bag onto her shoulder and hurried out of the study.

Was that the most pleasant conversation she'd had with Frank Slough so far? Hard to say for sure but it was certainly up there. She remembered Xen's laughter, clapping her on the back as she came trembling out of what had passed for a job interview.

'I think he likes you!' she'd said, eyes sparkling with amusement beneath long, seafoam-green hair.

Diya had just shaken her head, letting out the sobs she'd held in as Frank Slough had simply stared at her in stony silence for almost ten minutes

while she tried to explain why she wanted the job. But Xen had apparently been right. The job was hers.

The main hall was probably the best place to start her search for ‘valuables’. She could finish with the living room, one of the only places in the gloomy basement flat that had windows to let in the daylight. Working towards the sun felt like a good way to think about it.

She approached the first pile, kneeling to get a sense of its contents. The mound of fabric lay there, garments twisted around and disappearing into each other until it was unclear what sort of clothes Diya was looking at, or whether it was simply a collection of loose rags and material. She pulled away the uppermost piece, which seemed to have once been a cardigan. The holes that ran all through the wool suggested moths, and the hundreds of tiny brown insect corpses still caught in the fibres confirmed it in a shower of tiny insect death.

Diya’s skin crawled inside her suit. She hated moths. When she was young they’d had an infestation of carpet moths. She remembered her father pulling out all the furniture, her mother pouring some sort of foul-smelling dust on those bare, weirdly crunchy patches of missing carpet. She remembered the tiny eggs, all over the carpet like minuscule flecks of grain. It went on for years like that, her father getting angrier each year that the moths returned. She hadn’t understood it back then, the feeling of trespass, of your home seeming to turn against you.

She tossed the ruined cardigan to the side. There was nothing of value left there. The next thing on the pile was an old skirt, once long and dignified in navy blue, now as much of a worn away husk as the cardigan. Then a jumper, handknitted with great care, colourful yarn winding together into an intricate cascading pattern, now rotten and moth-chewed. Someone had made this with love. Diya threw it onto the pile of things without value.

So it went as she proceeded, pile by pile, down the narrow corridor. She hadn’t expected much of the clothing to be considered ‘valuable’ by whatever distant relative was inheriting the possessions of … What was her name? Frank must have told them the name of the lady who died here at some point. Surely, he must have, and then Diya had forgotten. Was that awful of her? Or maybe he hadn’t said. Maybe that was deliberate, part of the whole procedure. It was all just a job, another life to mop up along with the body, until nobody could tell it had been there at all.

That seed of curiosity fired up in her mind once more, cutting through the muting fog. This was her first … client? Maybe this was routine to the others, but Diya should remember the woman's name.

She'd get used to it, though. Something inside her was sure of that. This was her life now: rummaging through rags, looking for the glint of gold or silver to pass to whoever was left to grieve. Mary didn't have to go looking for ghosts in these places. The white shapes that passed silently through the halls of the dead weren't carrying chains, but sponges and bleach. And Diya was one of them, at least until it was her turn for the evidence of her existence to be scrubbed off the floorboards and carted to the incinerator like Angie.

Stifling her tears, Diya tried to level her breathing and cut off this train of thought. It was a job, just like any other, and as much as she really needed it right now, it wasn't exactly a life sentence. Was it any surprise that she was in a morbid frame of mind, given how her last few months had been and the nature of what she was doing? If she'd told any of her friends or family, they'd probably have warned her away from this sort of work. But she hadn't, and right now this was where she needed to be. It was just another job. Her life wasn't over. Even if, right now, it smelled like it was.

Her hand closed on something small and hard, breaking her train of thought. It was only then she realised exactly how repetitive the rhythm of pick up, check over, put down had become. How routine. Was this how quickly it all started to become normal? Her watch said she'd been at it less than an hour but her mouth felt dry and scratchy. She needed to step outside, get some air and drink some water. She went to stand up when she realised that she was still holding whatever it was she had found in the pile. A thin chain dangled from her closed fist and, when she opened it, she saw a small gold heart sitting in her palm. A locket.

Fumbling with the little clasp was awkward in her thick gloves, but after a few moments it popped open. Inside were a pair of faded black-and-white pictures: a smiling young woman with dark, curly hair, and a man who Diya couldn't really call handsome, but who seemed at least to be happy. Time had done some work on the photographs, but for the most part they seemed to have escaped the decay that pervaded the rest of the house.

Diya stared at the young woman. Was she the one who would someday die, bloated and alone on a bare mattress, entombed by an illness that had

blighted her for decades? And what of the young man? A future husband, gone before his time? A youthful love that left when the going got tough? Was this little shining keepsake a reminder of better times or a bitter memento of what might have been? Diya sighed and dropped it into a Ziploc bag, then sealed it shut.

She heard movement behind her. Standing in the doorway was a figure in white coveralls like hers. The height would have indicated it was Mary, but she couldn't see the face under the figure's mask. Diya waited for it to say something, trying to shake off uneasiness. There were only the four of them there, after all.

'Did you find anything?' Mary's voice was cheery and Diya exhaled. She was going to need to get used to this whole 'semi-faceless' thing.

'Yeah,' she replied, tossing over the small bag. 'Think it might have been the woman that lived here.'

Mary examined the locket.

'She looks kinda—' Diya started, before Mary held up her hand for silence.

Slowly, her new colleague peeled away the thick blue rubber glove from her right hand, seemingly oblivious to the state of the corridor around her, and touched her fingertips to the locket that still lay in the sealed bag. Diya could just about make out that her eyes were closed.

'Are you OK?' Diya asked as the quiet stretched out.

'Yes …' Mary sounded a bit disorientated, but handed the Ziploc bag back over. 'Thank you.'

When Diya had first properly met Mary, they'd been drinking with Xen at The Prince Edward. It had been easier to brush it off then, among the laughter of strangers, when she'd started talking about spirits and resonances and all the rest of it. Here, among the dust and the rot, it was harder to roll her eyes.

'Poor old thing,' Diya said, unsure what else to say.

'The woman who died here?'

'Yeah.'

'I wouldn't worry about it.' Mary's voice was soft. 'I suspect she is at peace.'

Now the eyeroll came easily. Mary obviously thought she was being cryptic, and Diya really didn't feel up to getting into it.

‘I mean, my aunt had a hoarding problem, and I think it was kind of an OCD thing. I never saw the place, but my mum always talked about how distressing it was for her. In the end, Liverpool Council had to get involved and … I don’t know. It just really seems to me that this woman needed help she didn’t get.’

‘Maybe.’ Mary didn’t sound like she needed much insight beyond whatever she thought she’d got from the locket.

‘She was just so alone.’ Diya couldn’t get the thought out of her head. She had found precious little that gave any hint as to who the woman had been. The sheer mass of accumulated possessions seemed to obscure the person behind them, rather than to illuminate her. ‘What about the next of kin? They must have known her?’

Mary shrugged. ‘Often in cases like these, the first time they hear about a relative is when they’re being asked to sort out their affairs.’

Diya’s eyes fell on the locket. ‘They’re quick enough to take anything worthwhile.’

‘I guess.’ Mary indicated the rest of the hallway. ‘But in most cases there isn’t much to take. I think sometimes the relatives would rather they didn’t have the bother.’

‘Was it them who hired us for this job?’

‘Don’t think so. Might have been the landlord, maybe. Dad usually deals with all that stuff.’

‘Right.’

There was a pause as Mary put her glove back on. She seemed suddenly sheepish.

‘Sorry, I usually do my … communing on my own. I just thought you might understand.’

‘No, it’s fine.’ Diya shifted uncomfortably. Why would Mary assume that? Just because she’d also lost someone? ‘I was just going to get a bit of air anyway.’

‘All right,’ Mary said lightly, though her expression was hard to read under the mask and goggles. ‘I’d better get back to it.’

And with that she was gone. Diya allowed herself a small sigh of relief. She did think that she could like Mary, but Xen had been right: her sister could be a lot. The old woman’s spirit was at peace, she had said. Staring at the crusty piles of threadbare clothing it didn’t seem possible. It seemed like

a life that had ossified while no-one was looking, growing hard and implacable, squeezing the soul who found themselves trapped by it until they succumbed to its crushing pressure.

Diya stepped outside for the briefest of breaks, the cool air sweeping over her, dispelling the gloomy thoughts. Whoever the dead woman was, she had been a person. Not some tragic parable or gruesome metaphor about holding onto the past. She had been a real human being with a real condition and there was no way for Mary or any of them to know how she had felt about that, whether she had been suffering and how. All Diya could say for sure was that nobody had been there for her. She had died alone.

‘Rough day?’ asked an unremarkable man standing next to the skip.

‘Yeah,’ Diya said without thinking, ‘really rough.’

‘It’ll get easier,’ he said lightly. ‘The first one’s always the hardest.’

‘I hope so. Don’t know if I could handle it being much harder,’ Diya said, turning to face him, but he was already strolling away with a smile still just about visible on his face.

Regardless, she felt slightly calmer now. Diya took a deep breath, heading back inside. At least the woman who lived here hadn’t been murdered. Although Diya likely would be, by Frank, if she didn’t get a move on with the valuables. She resumed her sorting, finishing the last of the hallway piles with the discovery of a few buttons that might have been pearl. She felt a bit ghoulish ripping them off the silk blouse they were attached to, but there had been so little silk left that ‘blouse’ was entirely a guess.

After that, the hunt went relatively quickly. It soon became apparent that anything non-metallic was almost certainly too old and decayed to retain much value at all. Even the porcelain had been piled up so haphazardly that most of it was broken or cracked, with the exception of a small collection of porcelain sheep figurines that seemed to have survived in relatively good condition. They were almost certainly worthless kitschy knick-knacks, but Diya bagged them up carefully anyway on the off-chance they were rare or antique.

Aside from that it was the occasional piece of jewellery, some fancy photo frames (empty) and the occasional *objet d’art* buried under old newspaper or behind a pile of fused-together jigsaw boxes. She did find the name of the woman whose home it had been when she was going through

the study, though: ‘Elizabeth’, though she had gone by ‘Liza’ in her letters. Diya had almost found herself reading through them, that old curiosity firing up again, but stopped short. It felt too much like an invasion of privacy, stepping over some weird line. She knew the woman’s name, and that’s what she had wanted. She even found a couple of photos of her, posing with a pair of other women her age. Sisters? They looked similar enough. More than that, they looked happy. The pictures were decades old.

Eventually Diya found herself with the nylon bag about half full of trinkets of questionable value, and she stared out of the living room window at the afternoon sun. She felt a little bit faint; she’d never spent so long in a filter mask before, and the synthetic feel of the coverall was oppressive. The crisp autumn air waited for her just beyond that window, she could almost smell it. But she knew she wasn’t quite done. There was still the bedroom to do, assuming Mary and Frank were finished in there, as well as the kitchen.

She’d been avoiding the kitchen as well. Not quite so ardently as the bedroom, of course, but when she’d come to check the place over it had been almost time for lunch. Based on what Xen had said, she really hadn’t felt it was a room she wanted to tackle just before eating, and afterwards she just … hadn’t gone back to it. But if she was going to finish her assigned task before the end of the first day, both it and the bedroom needed doing. Diya tried to steel herself, straightened her mask and headed down the corridor. The stench of spoiled dairy seemed to ooze from around the doorway, but she gritted her teeth and pushed the door open.

It was with an immense sense of relief that Diya saw Xen had already done a first pass of the room, and while the stacks of rusted tin cans and broken kitchen utensils remained, it looked as though all the actual food had already been thrown out. That would make it a lot more endurable, though the smell certainly had a way of lingering. It should be a simple enough job, though. Just go through the cupboards and make sure there was nothing hidden there that might be worth anything. Oh, and check if any of the appliances were worth salvaging. How long could that take?

The surfaces were the obvious place to start. Nothing was lurking in the piled tin cans, and the toaster was busted, as were the multiple different food processors that seemed to have been partially pulled apart. The kettle seemed to be working, but it was a cheap plastic model and looked old

enough that, if it did have any worth, it was as a museum piece. The sink was completely empty, for which Diya silently thanked Xen, especially when she noticed a few remaining strands in the plug of what might very well have been human hair. A huge cauldron-like pot sat on the small dining table in the corner, filled to the brim with rusted tongs and spatulas and knife-blades snapped from their handles. The fridge was entirely empty save for a gruesome splash of violet mould, and the cupboards were filled with more jars like the ones over the old couch. What even were they? Homemade preserves that hadn't lived up to the name? Nothing of any value, in any case, which Diya couldn't pretend wasn't something of a relief. She was just about to leave when she remembered the oven.

She almost didn't bother. What, was there going to be an antique tiara tucked at the back of the lower rack? More likely it was going to be an antique pizza with an additional topping of maggots. But when she glanced through the glass door it certainly didn't look empty. She couldn't quite make out what it was without the light. She squatted in front of it, and reached up for the little button that turned on the interior light. Chances were, the bulb had blown anyway and she wouldn't be able to—

The light inside the oven clicked on and Diya leapt back in shock as a pair of wide, glassy eyes stared back at her. She managed not to shriek, pressing her back against the pantry door. Steadying her breathing, she looked again. The eyes were still there, but without the sudden surprise, it was clear they weren't real. They were made of glass or plastic or something similar. Diya moved slowly towards the oven and gently pulled the door open to reveal an old baby doll. Its body was limp cloth, with barely any stuffing left inside a faded yellow onesie, scorched at the edges. Its head was spongy rubber, pitted and worn away near the mouth, the painted blond hair barely visible, but the plastic eyes were still shiny, and blankly staring.

'Xen!'

It only took a couple of seconds before the kitchen door was filled with the tall, spindly shape of her friend. Even hidden within the layers of her suit, Xen's silhouette reassured Diya, and the fear faded.

Only to be replaced by anger when she thought about what had happened for a moment.

'You asshole! You absolute shit!'

‘What did I do this time?’ The confusion in her voice sounded genuine.

Diya just pointed towards the old oven. Xen followed her finger and did a double take, then let out an appreciative laugh.

‘Fuck! Look at that!’

‘That wasn’t you?’

‘No, I didn’t think to do the oven.’ Xen sounded legitimately delighted. ‘Was going to but just forgot. Damn, that’s creepy as fuck, though!’

‘You don’t need to be quite so happy about it. Gave me a real shock.’

‘Nah, Diya, you don’t get it. This is what it’s all about, you know? When I go, I’m going to set up so much sinister shit, whoever comes in to clean me up is going to think my house is full-on cursed.’

‘Well, I’m glad you’re getting such a kick out of it.’

Xen took a moment and looked at Diya. Under the suit, her shoulders shifted in sudden self-consciousness.

‘I’m sorry, Diya,’ she said. ‘I didn’t mean to … I know it’s your first day and everything. I just love this stuff, y’know?’

‘Yeah.’ Diya got to her feet. ‘I guess it is kind of funny.’

‘You sure you’re all right?’

‘I’ll be fine.’

‘OK, well, I just gotta take out the last bag of clothes and we’re done for the day. Mary said you’d already checked them over.’

‘Mmhm.’

Diya looked again at the doll that now hung down lifeless, half in and half out of the oven, trapped in the wire shelf. Steeling herself, she marched over, yanked it out and tossed it through the door into the hallway. It could be thrown away with all the clothes.

‘Oh, by the way, Dad said don’t worry about the bedroom, he’s already taken care of it.’

The absolute relief that flooded Diya’s body left her feeling almost physically weak, and she slumped against the mildewed wall.

‘You all right?’ There was a note of concern in Xen’s voice.

‘Yeah. Yeah, I’m good.’

‘Don’t worry, I get it. It can be a rough job. No shame in having a bit of a turn. Better than my first day: I puked my guts out. Good thing the cops were already done or that would have been one contaminated crime scene.’

Diya didn’t answer. Tomorrow. She could confront the bedroom tomorrow.

‘Come on, let’s get you into the fresh air. Dad’s buying Chinese.’

‘To Diya’s first day on the job!’

It was the most energetic Mary had sounded since she’d met her last week, and her smile seemed entirely genuine as she raised a glass of water in toast. Xen grinned and lifted a small bottle of Asahi in agreement. Their father said nothing, but did take a sip of his own beer when the toast was completed.

‘How was it?’ Xen said. ‘As bad as you thought it was going to be?’

‘Worse.’ Diya couldn’t quite get it to sound like a joke.

Xen grinned at this, and even Frank nodded to himself in satisfaction. Only Mary looked a little bit sympathetic.

‘You do get used to it,’ she said, ‘and it’s important to keep—’

‘So, you gonna quit?’ Frank asked, cutting his daughter off.

Diya was quiet for a second. It hadn’t been asked as a joke and he watched her as she considered it. For some reason it was the memory of the doll, of its glassy eyes, that came back to her for a moment. And the locket, with its faded faces of a happier past.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I don’t think I will.’

Frank said nothing, only gave another nod of satisfaction.

‘That’s good.’ Mary smiled. ‘We’re used to working with four and it’s been hard without George.’

A look passed across Frank’s face, a sudden flash of genuine anger. Mary coughed gently and lowered her gaze to her beef satay. Xen finished her beer. Diya was aware of George, the brother she had been brought in to replace, and had plenty of questions about him, but it didn’t look like they were getting answered tonight.

‘Where you staying at the moment?’ Frank asked, clearly straining the limits of his small talk. ‘Same place as before?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You got a new flatmate or …?’

‘Dad, come on!’ Xen gave him a look of exasperation.

‘Just trying to make conversation.’

‘It’s all right.’ Diya could see an argument brewing in Xen’s eyes. ‘No. I’m there alone. I can afford it now. Thanks to you.’

Frank shrugged. ‘Death pays.’

Mary looked like she was biting back some comment on this, but Xen nodded and returned to her meal. It felt weird to hear it said out loud, but he certainly wasn’t wrong. Diya hadn’t been able to find much in the way of salary comparisons out there, but if all death and trauma clean-up companies paid as well as Slough & Sons, it was a very lucrative market indeed.

‘Death pays,’ she mumbled to herself. Which was good, because right now it was all she had.

The flat was empty when Diya arrived home. Of course it was. It was always going to be empty now. She dropped her keys in the small bowl next to the front door and slumped onto the sofa. The soft cushions embraced her, and she finally relaxed. She took a deep breath … and was immediately aware of how bad she smelled.

Diya groaned. This wasn’t fair. She’d already washed up after the house. She’d changed her clothes, she’d done everything Xen had recommended, how did she *still* stink? Of course, she had known this was the deal. If she was going to work in clean-up then some weeks she was going to spend the whole time stinking of death or cat piss or god knows what else, but that didn’t make it any less of a chore to roll into her second shower in as many hours. Her hair wasn’t even fully dry from the first one.

Even so, there was something reassuring about her own shower. A familiarity to the water pressure, and she didn’t even need to look when grabbing her shampoo. No chance of getting it confused with anyone else’s. Anymore.

The familiar grief began to pass over her, and Diya put her hand on the wall, stabilising herself. The sensation passed quickly this time, and she smiled bitterly at the thought that she hadn’t even started sobbing yet. She was lathering again when something dropped from her dark hair to the floor of the shower with a faint plinking sound. She stared at it for some time, unsure of exactly how to feel as the glass doll’s eye stared back at her.

2

Detritus

The next morning was overcast, with a sort of warmth that should have made the journey to Crayford Road quite pleasant, but today it just made Diya's skin crawl. Right now, there were bad days, and then there were worse days. Today was the latter. The van stood on the kerb outside, so bright and white that it made her feel hard and grey by comparison. She wondered if Frank ran it through a carwash every morning. Perhaps she would have been more comfortable working with Slough & Sons if the van had been a little less pristine, with a layer of grime, and 'CLEAN ME' drawn in the dirt on the back by a childish finger.

It was thrown into even starker contrast by the grungy yellow builders' skip that now stood next to it, already partially filled with junk. So far it was mainly books, a foundation of paperbacks so suffused with damp that they had formed solid bricks of pulp. On top of that was developing a thin stratum of crockery and rusty metal cookware. As Diya stared at it another pair of frying pans sailed in with a clatter and she looked up to see Frank watching her, thin beads of sweat visible beneath his safety goggles.

'Sorry I'm late. The buses were a nightmare,' Diya lied, suddenly aware that her Tyvek suit was still only half on. 'I was waiting for—'

She stopped when Frank just nodded at her and gestured with his head towards the stairs leading down to the flat, then pointed at the skip.

'No batteries, electronics or liquids,' he said, before marching back into the house.

Diya sighed, sealed up her suit, and headed down the stairs to the front door. Inside, various junk that had been strewn about in distinct piles was now gathered together, and separate areas had been unofficially designated

for the garbage that couldn’t be lumped together with the general waste. Xen walked past carrying an armful of broken plastic baskets and gave Diya a nod.

‘Everything OK?’ Mary’s voice came from the bathroom.

‘Uh, yeah. Sorry, I know Mr Sl— your dad doesn’t like it when people are late.’

‘I don’t really know.’ Mary looked off in thought. ‘It’s never really been a possibility before. I mean, we’d all just take the van from home.’

‘Oh.’ Diya wasn’t sure what she was meant to say to that. ‘What if one of you moved out?’

‘Hasn’t happened yet.’

‘Right,’ Diya said, thinking of George.

‘I could ask him about picking you up? You could drive to work with the rest of us?’

‘I don’t know.’ The thought of travelling in the van unsettled Diya, as though it were a level of intimacy she wasn’t yet ready for. ‘It’s probably really out of your way. And, I mean, London traffic …’

‘You’re pretty close to us.’ Of course, Mary knew that. ‘I’ll mention it to Dad, at least.’

Diya didn’t feel like she could outright reject the offer, so she just had to hope Frank would do it for her. Or that Mary would get distracted by something and forget.

Xen peeked her head into the room.

‘Come on, Diya,’ she said, ‘we’ll start in the bedroom.’

It was fine, Diya told herself. The smell was thicker here than the other rooms and had a greasiness to it that sickened her slightly, but it wasn’t the choking stench she had been afraid of. Her eyes moved to the bed, only to be greeted by the sight of an empty frame. The mattress was gone.

‘Oh, yeah.’ Xen saw where she was looking. ‘First thing we got rid of. Might even have been before you arrived yesterday. I mean, you can’t leave that sort of thing hanging around. She’d been dead a good month before anyone found her, and when they start to liquify you’ve gotta send that shit to be incinerated right away.’

Diya was barely listening. She expected to feel more at ease, reassured she wasn’t going to have to deal with the bed where the woman had died. But instead she felt, what, cheated? Or that she had somehow failed, as if

she'd been unable to face her responsibilities and now the opportunity had passed. Xen kept talking with a voice as light as if she were discussing an irritating commute.

'At least the old bat had a good mattress, soaked basically all of it up. I mean, when a body's that far gone you can't really get stuff clean again. If the mattress soaks through and that nasty corpse soup gets into the floor, that's it. Game over. You've gotta pull that whole area up and let me tell you, landlords do *not* like being told that. Plus, the heating wasn't on, which is good news. Had an old man die in front of an active electric heater once, cooked the fat right off him over the course of a week, and if you think *this* smells bad …'

'Thanks, Xen,' Diya cut her off. 'I get the picture.'

'Sorry, bit morbid for eight thirty, I guess.' Xen didn't *sound* sorry.

Diya ignored it, and the two of them got to work in earnest.

As she worked through the bedroom, Diya spotted small areas that were already basically spotless, and realised they must have been where there were traces of the dead woman. But the chemicals had done their work so well they were now the cleanest areas of the room. With no hint remaining of … what had her name been? The realisation that she had already lost it made Diya feel even worse. She had been so keen to not let this woman be forgotten, but again, she'd failed. There was no part of the poor, lonely creature left. Memories fail, time fades, chemicals cleanse. We all vanish in the end.

She started with the bits of ageing furniture in the corner, perhaps put aside with the intention of repair. They went into the skip. Followed by the empty leather suitcases which, according to Xen, had previously contained toenail clippings and human hair. Today, Diya was too shrouded in gloom for it to even pique her curiosity, and instead her pity deepened. The broken hair dryer, as well as both TVs (one so old that it proudly proclaimed 'COLOUR' on the casing) went with the other appliances for electrical disposal. The process was a lot more physically strenuous than the task from the day before, but there was a certain sort of rhythm to it, and her sadness faded to familiar numbness. Diya needed to remember her headphones for the next day – the process really needed music to zone out to.

Maybe Xen had some spares she could borrow? She headed back out into the corridor and down towards the study, quietly pushing open the door. Sure enough, there was Xen, hunched over the old bureau. As Diya got closer, she saw something in her friend's hands. Papers, yellowed at the edges, with the curling lines of the handwriting she recognised from the woman's letters.

Xen was quiet, lost in thought, and for a moment Diya wondered whether to leave her to this private moment, but as she took a step back her foot caught against an empty paint tin that lay just beside the doorway. The noise wasn't loud, but it was enough for Xen to look up.

'Oh, hey,' she said, getting to her feet and scrunching the papers up. 'Was just gathering the rest of this for the trash.'

She tried to sound casual as she took an armful of other loose papers and envelopes from the open bureau and hurried out past Diya towards the entrance.

'It's all right, you don't need—' But Xen was already gone.

With a small shrug, Diya wandered towards the remaining papers. It was none of her business, really, what Xen did, how she felt about the work, the people that they cleaned up after. They weren't that close, at least not yet. She wondered again at how odd it was to be working with this family who were all but strangers to her, as she reached out and picked up one of the letters still on the bureau's writing desk.

It was from a man named Charles. He was having to stay longer in Zurich and likely wouldn't be back until the summer. As she read it, Diya was suddenly certain that he wouldn't be back at all. That it was all over. Why did that baby doll suddenly spring into her mind? Old and faded and torn, but perhaps too precious to be thrown away.

Looking at the walls, she saw for the first time how oddly inappropriate the wallpaper was for a study – the cartoony bears and balloons almost completely hidden by the dirt and fading of decades. Maybe a child had once lived there, and it had been repurposed once they were grown, but Diya couldn't shake the feeling that it had been intended for someone who had never arrived.

She sat down on the office chair in the corner, feeling oddly weak. Two of the chair's wheels were missing, but it was comfortable enough to perch on while she collected herself. Obviously spending time working in places

like this took its toll, and she needed to adjust to it. Whatever happened, she couldn't let herself seem weak in front of Frank, she was certain of that. However unpleasant this job was, she really didn't think anywhere else would take her on after the way she'd left her old position. And the money was *very* good.

Diya tried to stand, but her legs shook. She was exhausted – something about the sadness of that letter had really shaken her. Maybe this was all a bad idea. It hadn't been that long since Angie died, and the sheer physical fatigue of her early grief might not have fully gone away. The emotional numbness certainly hadn't. But what was the alternative? She'd already burned through her savings and, even if Angie had had a life insurance policy, "best friend and housemate" didn't usually qualify you as a beneficiary. She could go back and stay with her parents for a while, but the thought made her shudder.

'You on break?' Frank's voice rumbled from the door and Diya suddenly found the strength to get back to work.

The third day was the most intense. All the detritus and rubbish was finally gone, leaving only the empty rooms and salvageable furniture. Now came the time for sweeping, mopping and scrubbing, diving into the crevices and covering vast swathes of flooring with bleaches and chemicals of varying potency. At one point Diya found herself dizzy from the fumes and Xen had to order her out for some fresh air.

Still, there was a real sense of progress for most of the day. They worked the rooms in pairs, and their efforts were rewarded as grease and grime receded. There were a few stumbling points, of course. Stains that took a huge amount of hard work to shift, calcified messes that needed to be broken off with a chisel, and the fact that they had to entirely strip several rooms of wallpaper (including the faded bears and balloons of the study), but after all of it was done there was no small amount of pride glowing through Diya. Even Frank seemed pretty pleased with the day's work as he gently puffed away on his pipe, though he expressed it by reminding them how lucky they were the place hadn't had any carpeting that would have had to come up. Mary just stood there, watching the stairs in quiet contemplation.

Outside, the sun was shining with just enough of a breeze to cool Diya's face when she lowered her hood and slid off her mask. It was a good feeling, she realised, to take somewhere so dark and squalid and reclaim it. Wiping away the rot and the dirt until you'd never know anyone had lived there at all. The thought stopped her short, as the feelings of the day before resurfaced.

Before she could dwell on it further, though, the back of the van opened and Xen called her over, handing down a surprisingly heavy black box that looked like a music speaker and an electric fan had produced a squat child. Diya hauled it over to the pavement while Xen grabbed a second one and followed, leaving Mary to close the van doors behind her.

'Ozone,' Xen said, as though the word was an explanation, carrying one of the boxes down into the flat.

Diya looked over at Mary, who smiled.

'It's a smell thing. These generate ozone, which binds to the stuff in the air that causes all the smells and neutralises it.'

'Right. I thought ozone smelled bad as well, though?'

'It does, kind of.' Mary nodded. 'But once it dissipates it takes the other smells with it.'

'Oh.'

'Yeah. We leave them running a few days, then come by to pick them up. Smells quite fresh afterwards, actually. Like a field after a thunderstorm. I like it. I think it feels like a place has been reborn.'

'I guess that makes sense,' Diya said, picking up the second device.

'We can't stick around, though. Ozone can be pretty toxic. Come on, we'll get this one set up in the bedroom.'

Diya didn't really have anything to say to that, so she pulled her hood and mask back up and headed after Mary as she made her way through the clean, but no less dingy, flat.

There wasn't anything wrong with the electrics of the place, at least not according to what Frank said the landlord had said the surveyor had said, so it was simply a matter of plugging the machine into the now stain-free wall socket and turning up the dial on the front. It hummed into life, and Diya had to stop herself breathing too deeply to smell it for herself. Still, Mary didn't seem too hurried as she left the room, so it probably took a while to build up to toxic levels.

Ah, there it was. That clean, almost sweet smell. Almost like chlorine, but not quite. The scent of an artificial thunderstorm. Diya nodded to herself and took one last look at the bedroom where another human being had taken their own final look at the world. She couldn't help but imagine how it must have felt. The sense of being trapped here. The deep terror as her fingers rested on the door handle. She couldn't leave this place. She couldn't go outside. This was her home. But she was so scared. The man had come back, smiling and laughing, and she wasn't safe here. But she wasn't safe out there, either. They didn't want her out there. She felt hot tears trickle down her cheeks as she twisted her wrist painfully and pulled the front door open.

She expected to be greeted by sunlight, by fresh air, but beyond the door there was only darkness. No, not darkness. It was blocked. A solid mass of soiled fabric: torn silk and rotted cotton that seemed to shift with tiny, squirming life. She took a step away, wondering why it wasn't in the skip. Her heel caught on a pile of something hard and sharp, and she fell back.

As though waiting for her cry, the moths exploded out of the writhing heap in the doorway, the clothes shifting and spilling into the hallway like an oozing wound. She sputtered and screamed as the wildly fluttering shapes surrounded her. She tried to crawl away, to fight them off, but her flailing arms were so weak, and the moths seemed to be everywhere.

She moved back up the hallway slowly, agonisingly, as the flow of mouldy cloth followed behind her, the moths still fluttering wildly over every surface. In the distance she could hear it, that laughter, now accompanied by slow, deliberate footsteps. They didn't fall heavily, but seemed to echo, as though a crisp shoe were striking the marble floor of a great vault. They were coming from the direction of the front door, and they were getting closer.

Surely he couldn't get to her, she told herself. Whatever was happening, it had blocked the door, there was no way anyone could get inside the flat. Even him.

But she knew it wasn't true, that he could go where he pleased. That he could kill her in her own home and no-one would even know. She had to run, to hide. Through the filth and the pale shapes that swarmed around her, she painstakingly made her way back to her bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

The footsteps were closer now, making their inevitable way towards the room where she waited, shaking so violently she felt like her bones might shatter. She crawled over to her bed, stained and worn and welcoming. If anywhere was safe, it would be there. It greeted her aching body like an old friend. The footsteps stopped outside her bedroom. What was happening? Her view of the door was blocked by the pile of newspapers that stretched up before her. Had she really let it get that high? That was all she had time to think before the laugh came again and the pile collapsed, burying her for the last time and leaving her frail body to be entombed and forgotten.

‘Diya?’ Mary called from the hallway.

The smell of ozone was thick now, and Diya’s head pounded. Stupid, complacent idiot, she chided, staying cooped up in a house of chemical fumes all day, then standing there daydreaming in a room filling up with toxic gas. No wonder her imagination was going wild.

She staggered out in silence, glad of the goggles and mask that hid her no-doubt dazed expression and her mind blank as they emerged into the warm sunlight of the late afternoon. Was that some sort of weird, fume-induced delirium? Was she really that surprised?

‘Looks like we’re all done here,’ Xen said, already halfway out of her Tyvek suit, revealing her most casual look: a black T-shirt printed with a nuclear warning sign composed of three gender symbols, splashed in the colours of the trans flag, all above the words ‘This is the age of sin. Reject the order of creation. Revel in the annihilation of Man as the image of God. Destroy. Plot designs of death. Disfigure the face of Man and Woman’.

‘It’s over?’ Diya asked, unzipping her own suit and pulling off her mask.

Frank nodded to her as he finished loading the van.

‘We’ll be back in a few days to pick up the ozone generators, but yeah.’

‘Your first job’s all done.’ Xen was beaming at her. ‘And you did great!’

‘She did OK,’ Frank corrected.

‘High praise indeed. You fancy a drink? Celebrate your first full de-corpsing?’

Diya shook her head slowly as she pulled off her coveralls, hiding a bitter smile at the fact the corpse had been gone before she’d even got there. Why did that bother her so much?

‘Think I’d rather go home. Have a rest.’

Xen sighed, but didn’t try to argue. Mary smiled knowingly.

‘All right then, rain check,’ Xen said. ‘But don’t think you’re getting out of that drink. When you feel up to it, we’re celebrating the fuck outta this.’

‘Call you when the next job comes in,’ Frank called as the engine started. Then they were gone.

Diya watched the van drive away. A few passers-by glanced at her curiously, as she realised that she was still wearing her safety goggles. She pulled them off quickly and stuffed them into her bag with her mask and suit. As she did so, her gaze passed over the skip, now piled high with junk and detritus. Something fluttered at the top, caught on the broken spindle of a wire rack. It was old, faded paper, one of the letters she had seen before, Diya was certain. But as she got closer, she saw the page was blank.

She tried again to remember the dead woman’s name, but it was gone.

Diya stood in the doorway to what had once been Angie’s room, staring blankly at the bed she had made for her friend just over a month ago and which had never been disturbed. No, that wasn’t right. She hadn’t made it for Angie. Angie was already gone when she’d done it. Diya just hadn’t been able to stand looking at the mess it had been left in.

The tears were flowing freely now. She could have talked to Angie about this – about the job, about what she had felt, what she had seen. Angie would have said something stupid and insensitive, and Diya would have laughed and it would all have been OK.

But Angie was gone now. All she could do was miss her, and sit alone in the home they’d once shared, thinking over everything that had happened. She tried not to dwell on the odd hallucination she had experienced, but it lingered with her, more persistent even than the smell. She had imagined it, that much was certain, so why did it feel as if she had recognised that high, mocking laugh?

3

Angie

When Angie had died, it hadn't come as a shock. Or rather, obviously, it had been in the most literal sense. Diya had never felt as deeply, intensely cold as she did in the hours after she had found the body of her best friend. Her only friend. Diya had collapsed, shivering, sprawled out on the floor in what she imagined had looked like a grim tessellation of the corpse. Two bodies lying motionless, and for a moment she could not remember whether she was the one that still lived. She remembered being thirsty – her tongue and throat like sandpaper, as if all the moisture had vanished from her body – and her eyes felt frozen, unable to cry. All classic symptoms of shock, she was told afterwards by the paramedics.

It hadn't been expected, either. Angie was as open about her medical history as she was about every other aspect of her life. Diya had been there for her when cancer came for both Angie's parents one after another, and had been spared no detail. After they moved in together, it took only a few days for Diya to become familiar with every medication and supplement her new housemate was on. None of it was unusual, and none of it foreshadowed or gave any hint of the brain aneurysm that would eventually take her life. One evening Angie was unsuccessfully trying to convince Diya to watch her new Blu-ray copy of *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, and the next morning she was gone.

And yet. Somehow it made sense. Angie had lived so fully, so intensely, filling up every waking moment with experience and thoughts and dreams and people and plans; she had never had a feeling and not committed to it with her whole being. She was someone who had been so powerfully and completely *alive* that when it stopped, when she was finally still, it had felt

almost appropriate. There was a part of Diya's mind that told her that Angie had lived so much, so quickly that obviously she had simply used it all up, she had burned herself out too fast. Diya hated the part of her mind that whispered that to her, that took some sick satisfaction in the thematic rightness of the death, the part that she knew made her a bad person. But when the rest of her mind was paralysed in numb and shivering grief, it was the only one she could hear.

Yes, it had said. *How apt*.

How could a good person think like that? How could someone who cared about their friend, who had liked them, supported them, comforted them, have such a grotesque thought? Diya had been all that Angie had left in the world, she knew that, and yet when they wheeled the body away and wrapped her shivering shoulders in that crinkly foil blanket, all she could think of was a curtain falling after the show has come to an end.

In the playground there was a log. To a child's eye it was colossal – a mighty fallen tree that severed the painted hopscotch squares of the gravel playing area from the trampled grass and soil of the field. On a six-year-old it came up almost to chest height, and Diya would scramble up on top of it during break and sit there, watching the other children play. Maybe she could have joined their games if she had really wanted to, but she knew most of them didn't like her, and she would not lower herself to pleading just to be included in a game of Stuck in the Mud. So she would simply sit quietly and watch from a distance. At least when she was left alone.

Nothing quite sticks in the mind like the names of childhood bullies. For the rest of her life Diya would remember them, even after almost every other detail of her schooldays had faded away. These two were named Daman Jain and Benjamin Castor, and they seemed to have nothing in their life that brought them more joy than shattering the fragile peace that Diya found on the log.

This particular afternoon, they were throwing small sticks at her and shouting that she smelled bad. Diya closed her eyes and waited for them to get bored and wander away, like her mother had taught her. It always worked in the end, but it could take quite some time, especially if the teachers were occupied in another area of the playground.

A twig glanced off Diya's cheek and she opened her eyes to see Benjamin Castor grinning nastily as he and Daman Jain looked through the grass around them for more ammunition. Behind them, however, someone else was approaching. Angela Sutherland had wandered away from her skipping rope and was watching the situation with an odd look on her face.

Angela Sutherland said something quiet to the two boys, who shook their heads and said something back. Then Daman Jain pushed her. Angela Sutherland staggered backwards, but didn't fall down. As Diya watched, the little girl stood there quietly for a few seconds, before turning and moving a couple of steps away, where she bent low to the ground. Then, with a single, fluid motion she silently spun around and threw a rock the size of her fist at Benjamin Castor's head. It hit him in the temple with a crack and a shock of bright crimson blood appeared as he fell to the ground.

Everything was silent for a moment, other than the laughter of the other children in the distance, lost in their own games. Then the wail of Benjamin Castor split the air, the weeping cry of a child in pain. He pulled himself up, and he and Daman Jain ran, shouting back promises that they were going to tell on her.

Angie waited until they were gone, then climbed up onto the log and sat next to her new best friend.

They were both suspended for a week. Diya was mortified, of course, but sitting there next to Angie as Mrs Hale the headmistress tried to explain to them firmly that what they had done was very, very wrong, she couldn't imagine saying she had nothing to do with it. It didn't feel true, either. Angie had done it for her, had decisively declared herself Diya's new best friend and how could anybody say she wasn't a part of that? Even as her parents arrived, furious and confused, dragging Diya away for a long talk about responsibility and restraint, she looked back at Angie's face. There was a big beaming smile on it that made it clear as day that their friendship was only just beginning.

When asked, Angie would never tell Diya exactly what made her choose to step in to her defence in such a dramatic way. She always shrugged and laughed and suggested a different game, and by the time Diya was old enough to press for a proper answer Angie claimed to have forgotten the whole thing. Only once did she give any hint. They were fourteen years old and having an unauthorised sleepover. Angie had stolen a bottle of

vermouth from her parents' liquor cabinet and they choked down half a glass each before convincing each other they were drunk. As they watched Angie's DVD copy of *Jeepers Creepers*, Diya had looked over.

'Why did you save me?'

'When?'

'When we were kids. By the log.'

'Oh.' Angie swayed theatrically. 'I wanted to feel what it was like to hurt someone for real. And I thought that if I was your best friend in the world, I could hurt them for you and it would be all right. So I was. And I did. And I am.'

Diya didn't ask any more questions, and told Angie the next morning she'd been 'too drunk' to remember what they talked about.

The answer didn't exactly surprise Diya, though. Not after knowing Angie for so many years. While she was, on the surface, the picture of a quiet, mousy child, it only ever took the promise of something new to turn Angie's eyes twinkling with mischief. Much to the chagrin of her parents, the Sutherlands lived just down the road from them, meaning that as often and as vociferously as they might forbid Diya from spending time with Angie, there was little they could do to actually keep them apart. By the time they were in secondary school they were passing each other notes in class, writing weird little stories together, one line at a time. And they were getting into trouble. Well, Angie was getting into trouble. Diya had gradually got a sense for when hanging out with her best friend was harmless, weird fun, and when it might be time to go home. More than once Angie breathlessly told her of nights full of excitement, vandalism and even an accidental fire, and Diya found herself silently thankful she had left when she did. Well, mostly. The thrill she got from hearing about these misadventures was undeniable, but the few times she had found herself actually present for them, the sensation had been one of pure panic.

They were always there for each other when it mattered, though. Twice Angie's parents kicked her out, and Diya had sheltered her in her room for a couple of days – once even hiding her in a huge antique trunk as Mrs Burman had lectured her daughter for twenty minutes for not doing the washing up. Angie was always there for Diya as well, although there was a slight sense of dread whenever she took it upon herself to step in. Angie found it almost impossible to tell when things had gone too far. Or perhaps

she did know and took a secret pride in being willing to go further than almost anybody else.

Diya's first love was a boy named Peter Fraser. She'd been on dates before, even had a few kisses, but Peter was the first boy to make her understand with the absolute certainty of sixteen years that love was forever. He was tall, funny, and liked to read under a tree near the playing fields. They went to movies, took long walks and, when he turned seventeen and had a car, he would drive the two of them out of London and into nature. He had a knack for finding astounding views, and always told Diya that they couldn't hold a candle to her. Then he broke up with her to go out with Jessica Duffy instead.

There had never been a pain like it, Diya was sure. Certain she would die of a broken heart, she had confined herself to her room, locking herself away so that her parents actually called Angie themselves in the hopes that she could get through to her. Diya had laid her head on Angie's lap and sobbed away her troubles while her friend simply listened in silence. Angie, now grown into a whip-thin teen with short-cropped hair and a sharp smile, was no stranger to relationships. She picked up and discarded boys as they compelled and bored her by turns, but if she'd ever had real feelings for any of them, she never told Diya. Looking up at Angie's face, Diya saw a look in her eyes she hadn't seen since they were children. Part of her was scared, but another part of her was thrilled with the knowledge that this force of nature had chosen to be her guardian.

Peter Fraser's car exploded in the driveway of his parents' house. According to Angie, she had only ever meant to slash the tires and leave it a little scorched, but she didn't exactly know how cars worked and hadn't expected it to catch like that. However true that may have been, it blew out the downstairs windows of his house, totalled the car (which turned out to be his mum's that he borrowed sometimes) and left Peter himself unable to hear for a week. The police never found out who was responsible and, for whatever reason, Mr Fraser senior immediately jumped to the conclusion he was being targeted by organised crime, moving the family to Warwick a few months later. Only Diya knew what had really happened, and when Angie told the story, laughing all the while, she couldn't help laughing along as well.

Once, late at night, as their third year of university loomed, they lay on a hillside. The lights of the city spread out below them, bright pinpricks of illumination stretching into the darkness.

‘You look so sad,’ Diya had said.

‘I’m just thinking,’ came the reply.

‘About what?’

Angie didn’t reply immediately.

‘All those people. All that light. They’re all going to die.’

‘What do you mean?’ Diya’s brow creased. ‘When?’

‘Some day.’

‘Well, yeah.’

‘And so will we.’

‘I guess.’ Diya followed her friend’s gaze.

‘Eventually, we’ll all be gone. And all the lights will be gone.’

‘Yeah … Yeah. I guess that is sad.’

‘It’s kind of beautiful.’

‘What is?’ Diya asked quietly. ‘The city, or the fact that we’re all going to die?’

Angie didn’t answer.

But musing on the ephemeral nature of life and the beauty of the world’s inevitable end did nothing to prepare Angie for the blunt and awful reality of her parents’ dying. Their relationship had always been tempestuous, but the loss of them both in such quick succession seemed to break something inside her. She had graduated the year before, moving back to London, away from her other friends, and all of a sudden she was left with no-one, in the most gutting way imaginable.

When faced with that, what could Diya – at that very moment hunting for a place of her own – have done but offer to take Angie in? To be her stabilising, centring force; someone to help her build a life again almost from scratch. Diya’s parents didn’t like it, of course, but they knew better than to say anything by then. Her father’s forehead gained a crease at the news, and her mother stirred a pot of chana dal with just a fraction more ferocity, but they didn’t try to stop her.

The little flat they moved into in Hackney hadn’t been much: crumbling plaster and a boiler that died every six months as the landlord put off replacing it. But it had been a home, and it had been theirs, and they didn’t

give a damn about the security deposit so they covered the walls in colours and posters and knick-knacks. They'd got takeout from the Chinese on the ground floor of the building and eaten it sitting on the uncarpeted floor.

That had been ten years ago. Since then they'd had one more move, two arguments so bad Diya almost moved out, an actual physical fight, and an elderly ginger cat called Winston. Angie had started a photography business and Diya had progressed through four office jobs into what she couldn't quite bring herself to call a career (though the stress of it certainly fitted). Sometimes, lying on the couch, watching some grotesque Italian zombie film that Angie swore was 'genre-defining' (as if gory, undead flesh-eaters needed further definition), Diya would look at her friend and wonder if they were in love. They'd both come out as bisexual shortly after uni, and there had been more than one of Diya's partners who had expressed jealousy over their intimacy. Angie, for her part, rarely let her dates stay long enough for her flatmate to even get an introduction. For all the history and joy that they shared, Diya could never quite find it within herself to actually desire Angie in any romantic or physical way, and if her friend felt differently she never expressed it. As much as Diya enjoyed dating and sex, Angie was different. Angie was home.

And there was nothing in the world that Diya wished more than that she had told her so when she'd the chance.

Ten years is a long time, but if you're not paying attention it can pass in the blink of an eye. Days become weeks become months become years, and life blurs together in a stream of meetings and screens and Christmases and getting yourself a burrito every Thursday lunchtime. It wouldn't have been right to say that Diya was happy or unhappy because those feelings come and go, but she was comfortable. When placing events on her personal timeline she would have to take a moment to think, because was that before they moved offices to Liverpool Street? No, she and Angie were already in the new flat when that happened, but Winston hadn't lost the eye yet, so that would make it … 2013, maybe? It didn't matter. It wasn't that good a story.

Sometimes Diya tried to think back, to remember what the last actual conversation was that they'd had before she found her friend dead. There hadn't been many, in those last few weeks. Angie had been quiet,

withdrawn. The friends she was always telling stories about seemed absent, and she stayed in her room more. Diya had wanted to talk about it, reach out more, but there had been so much going on at work she just hadn't got around to it. She'd thought they had all the time in the world. If she really concentrated, Diya could conjure up a vague image of the two of them sitting on the sofa, drinking tea. Was that the day before? The previous weekend? But whenever she tried to think about it her mind would leap to the body, like a dramatic smash cut in one of Angie's old horror movies. Angie lying still on the floor, gone forever.

It had been a warm day when the white van pulled up, and the air had felt thick, though that might simply have been the feeling in Diya's chest. The vehicle idled for a few moments as some silent conversation took place between the figures in the front, then the engine died and it was still. The side door opened, splitting the words SLOUGH & SONS in two, and she remembered looking for the figure of Xen – the woman with the bright green hair she had met quite by chance at an overcrowded coffee shop some months before. They had ended up sharing first a table and then a conversation, with the stranger's bizarre line of work simply a curiosity that Diya had meant to bring up to Angie but never did. It felt faintly obscene to call it a fortunate coincidence, as though any part of this nightmare was fortunate, but it had, at the very least, made navigating the directory looking for 'trauma cleaning' a little bit simpler.

'Frank Slough. Sorry for your loss.'

The tall man in the coveralls didn't sound particularly sorry, just eager to get to work, something he clearly didn't feel like he could do until Diya had shaken his hand. So she did. His grip was firm and just as business-like as the rest of him, and she was suddenly aware that this was the first physical contact she'd had with another human being since Angie died.

Leading the three of them through into Angie's room, Diya had started to worry. In the morning light the pool of blood seemed even smaller than it had the day before, and looking around at these three professionals standing with their gloves and suits, she almost felt the urge to apologise that the room wasn't in a worse state. What must they think of her, these people who made their living scraping up brains and scrubbing away viscera, that she couldn't soak up a drop or two of blood.

‘Do you need anything from me? Cup of tea, or …’ Diya tailed off.

‘We’re fine,’ Xen said softly, pulling her mask up over her nose. ‘You can head to work, we’ll be gone by the time you get back.’

‘I think … I think I’d rather watch.’

There was an almost imperceptible hesitation, a quick glance from Frank that Diya might have been imagining. Then Xen shook her head.

‘You’d need your own protective gear. We’re handling biological waste, which means we can’t have anyone around who’s not suited up. We could be fined.’

‘Or worse,’ Frank said.

Diya froze. She’d been unsure what to say to that. Did she explain that going to work wasn’t really an option? That her employers didn’t really look at a ‘housemate’ bereavement like they did a parent or spouse? That it didn’t really get much sympathy as an answer to the question ‘why did you throw a Sports Direct coffee mug through your computer screen?’. That even if they had accepted it as a valid reason, the idea of spending another moment staring at reports and an endless stream of pointless emails made her want to physically vomit.

‘I’m, uh … between jobs at the moment.’

‘Well.’ Frank thought for a second, ‘A cafe then. Or a friend’s house, maybe. But it’s best you be gone.’

And that had been almost the extent of Diya’s first interaction with Slough & Sons. The rest of the clean was quick and efficient, and then the three of them were in their van and gone. Diya had gone inside and sat on the old sofa, slightly scrunched at one end because she knew Angie liked to splay out over the length of it. She sat there all afternoon. Winston snoozed on the armchair, apparently oblivious to any of it. At one point she turned on the TV, but she couldn’t have told you what was on. Eventually the sun went down and Diya got slowly to her feet and headed over to the kitchen for dinner. She stared into the fridge for ten minutes. She wasn’t hungry, but she knew she needed to eat. So she’d stood there eating bran flakes one at a time from the open box on the countertop. When she noticed that the light in the kitchen was off and she was standing in the dark, she didn’t turn it on.

When she was done with her dinner, Diya stood in the doorway of Angie’s bedroom, staring into the unlit space. She could make out that the blood was gone, and everything else was ever so subtly neater. Nothing had

been reorganised, but it was clear everything had been moved and replaced, leaving the place feeling more orderly, more deliberate. The faint smell of bleach lingered in the air and a September wind blew gently through the open window, bringing with it the musty scent of the alleyway below Angie's window.

The sudden vibration from the thin phone in Diya's jeans pocket had jolted her to full consciousness. How long had she been standing there? Something had felt off, like she had awoken in a strange room.

The phone buzzed again and she pulled it out and reflexively hit the green icon.

'Hello?'

'Hey, Diya, it's Xen,' The familiar voice carried a slight air of uncertainty. 'From earlier? The cleaners?'

'Yeah, I remember, of course. Is everything OK? Did you forget something?'

'No, not really. That is, uh, no.'

There was a pause.

'Are you still there?' Diya had shivered, the air from the open window seeming suddenly too cold.

'Yeah. Yeah, it's just … So my dad, uh … You said earlier you were out of work?'

'Yup.' She was trying not to think about it as she had basically nothing in savings and her employers had been quite clear that she wasn't getting much in the way of a reference after the damage she had caused. Diya honestly had no idea how she was going to get another—

'Do you want a job?'

4

The White Lion Job

After Crayford Road, the jobs kept coming, each time starting with Frank's gruff voice spilling tersely from her phone, giving her the address of their next destination or, if it was particularly out of the way or far from public transport, the simple words 'we're on our way'. This would herald a bumpy and somewhat uncomfortable ride in the back of the van, as she tried to find a workable place to sit on the piles of boxes and equipment cases that filled it.

The jobs were pretty constant, usually at least one a week. More if they were small ones (like Angie). The urgency of most calls meant the work didn't exactly respect weekends, but it wasn't as if Diya was doing much else with them these days, so it worked out, more or less. The strangeness of her first job had faded until it was just that: the strangeness of a job that wasn't exactly average, and while she'd since had actual encounters with corpses and decay (though Frank still took care of the more hands-on work), she hadn't experienced the dread she had felt in Crayford Road. Which proved you could get used to just about anything. By the time Frank called her about The White Lion, jolting her awake at six in the morning, she barely noted the details.

'Pub down Beckton way,' Frank said without preamble. 'Found a body out back, said it's a pretty nasty scene. There's delays on the DLR, so we'll pick you up.'

The call cut off and Diya was left to get ready and wonder exactly what Frank would deem 'a pretty nasty scene'. The van generally arrived about twenty minutes after Frank phoned, so she hurried to her room to get changed. While the protective suits they wore meant that it technically

didn’t matter what clothes she had on underneath, over the last two months Diya had gradually divided her wardrobe into ‘work clothes’ and ‘non-work clothes’. It depended less on the construction or material of the garment in question (though her few denim items had quickly become work mainstays) and more on how sentimental she felt about its associations. While she’d always been very careful, and nothing she wore had actually been contaminated, there were certain clean-up tasks that she simply didn’t want to do wearing an outfit she actually cared about. In this case she threw on an old pair of canvas trousers and a hoodie she’d got from an Alzheimer’s fundraiser she’d taken part in years ago. Angie hadn’t been there for that event (had it been the carol concert or the 10km run?), which was also a good reason to wear it. Like everything else in her life, her wardrobe could be a minefield if she wasn’t careful.

A single ring of the doorbell. Mary was here. A second, more insistent ring. Ah, looked like it was Xen. Diya hurried down and grabbed her bag, answering the door with what she hoped looked like a genuine smile.

‘You ready?’

‘Yup.’

‘Come on then.’ Xen nodded. ‘Dad’s waiting.’

‘You do remember he’s not *my* dad, right?’

‘Sorry. *Frank* is waiting for us in the van, and as his employees, it would behove us—’

‘Shut up.’

Xen grinned.

‘I’m on stereo duty today. Any requests?’

‘I mean, I can barely hear it back there, so knock yourself out with “Corpsewater” or whatever your latest Bandcamp find is.’

‘Oooh.’ Xen looked positively delighted. ‘I like “Corpsewater”. Great name. I’m thinking probably early 2000s melodic death metal. You might really have something there. Don’t suppose you play bass guitar?’

‘Get in the fucking van, Xen.’

The White Lion was a short, wide building that looked like it had never seen better days. It was tucked away on the edge of the huge car park next to a one-storey shopping centre dominated by a Tesco Extra. While it was technically accessible from a nearby footpath, it looked like most of its

patrons came to it through the shopping centre, and the whole thing gave the distinct impression of a bar waiting to draw in those driven to drink by their shopping experience. The pub had been there before the shopping centre was built, and it was clearly well-frequented by locals, but the whole situation had a whiff of existential bleakness to it that Diya couldn't help but feel. She pulled the van door open to the sight of an empty car park.

The four of them hopped out. The place was close to deserted, aside from a few shoppers getting an early start. The pub was unlit, but it would likely be some hours before it would open anyway. According to Frank, the job was an exterior one, so Xen and Mary unloaded the pressure washer while he headed to the front door. A slightly ghoulish curiosity, one of the few things to penetrate the fog that regularly surrounded her, caused Diya to glance around the parts of pub wall she could see, looking for anything grotesque, or any clue as to who it was that might have died here, but there was nothing obvious. She glanced back to where Mary and Xen were unloading, but Diya had learned by now that more than two people buzzing around the van tended to just get in the way, so she followed Frank to the front of the pub.

It took a few solid knocks before the owner, or at least the man she assumed to be the owner, came over. He squinted through the glass of the front door, then undid a trio of deadbolts and opened it. He didn't invite them in, but rather stepped outside to meet them, closing and relocking the door behind him. The morning sun was unkind to the man. In the gentle gloom of a pub his carefully coiffed hair, sculpted stubble and satin shirt would have looked, if not good, then at least appropriate, but the bright light of day showed the deep bags under his eyes, the burst blood vessels criss-crossing his nose, and the little stains and pinhole burns that covered the front of his outfit.

'You called us?' Frank asked.

'I called someone,' the owner said, shrugging. 'You the cleaners, then?'

'Yeah.'

Whatever the exact nature of their task was, the man didn't seem in any massive hurry for them to sort it.

'This way.' He waved for them to follow him and headed around the side of the building. Diya looked to Frank, who was already moving. There was a faint approval in his face, like he'd finally found someone who

communicated on the same wavelength he did. And he wasn't exactly wrong, she mused.

As they walked along the outside of the pub, Diya could see a fenced-off courtyard area at the back. Wooden fences enclosed a small unloading and storage bay, with a pair of wide, sturdy-looking gates. Diya realised this was going to be her first outside job, and she was very glad it was, given the smell that surrounded them as they got closer. A cocktail of bodily fluids, most notably vomit, all underpinned with the thick, hoppy smell of stale beer.

'Looks like a homeless guy jumped the fence last night, hoping for shelter, then he had some kinda attack and died there. They already took the body. It's pretty bad in there.'

Their guide sounded almost like he was trying to get them excited, or maybe just to get a rise out of them. But his nasty little smirk couldn't quite hide the revulsion in his voice.

'Any violence?' Frank asked. Whatever reaction the owner was fishing for, he wasn't getting it. The man deflated slightly.

'Only the sort you do to yourself with years of drinking meths and sleeping rough. Paramedics reckon he had a seizure or something and his body all spewed itself up then shut down. Think that's what they said anyway. Did us all a favour, the way I see it, removing himself from the gene pool. Just wish the little shit hadn't chosen my place to do it, go out picking my pocket, so's I got to pay you … Well, you get it.'

Frank's moustache twitched ever so slightly. It seemed to Diya that the owner had done a very efficient job of cutting off whatever camaraderie he might have been feeling. Maybe the landlord talked too much after all.

The owner opened the padlock and removed the thick chain that secured the doors to the rear courtyard. He tried to open the gates with a flourish, but they were a bit too heavy, and he stumbled.

The spot where the man had died was a puddle of assorted foul liquids at the base of a large rack of metal beer barrels. Despite the smell, it seemed as though the contamination was only over a relatively small area. At least, so she thought at first, but as Diya stepped inside with Frank, she followed his eyeline. Everywhere he looked, she saw something new: another small pool of vomit next to the glass bins, a smeared handprint on the loading dock, a spatter of dried blood over the pile of wooden pallets. The man had

clearly been staggering around in a pretty dreadful state for some time before he finally fell.

‘We’ll take it from here,’ Frank said, and Diya could almost hear the owner sag in relief.

‘You need anything else from me?’

‘Just keep this area clear till we’re done. That drain’ – he pointed to a square iron grate in the corner of the yard – ‘it’s clear? No overflow problems?’

‘Yeah, we use it for dumping old beer, should be fine.’

‘All right. We should be set then.’

‘How long is this going to take?’

‘We should be gone by seven.’

‘No way. All day? And I can’t open until it’s done?’

‘Not legally, no.’

Diya watched as the shorter man hesitated for a second, studying Frank’s face for any hint of a double meaning or winked understanding, but her boss gave nothing away.

‘Fine,’ the owner said, just about remaining civil. ‘I’ll be inside if you need me.’

With that he was gone.

‘What a piece of shit,’ she said at last.

‘Come on,’ Frank said, not disagreeing with her. ‘Let’s get to work.’

‘Diya?’

The voice caught her by surprise, and she almost slammed the door to the van, as though she’d been doing something embarrassing and was trying to hide it. She turned to see a smiling face.

‘Greg, hi!’ she said, trying to quash the irrational panic that she suddenly felt at seeing her old friend. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I was just doing some shopping. I live just around the corner.’

‘Oh. Right. Of course.’ Diya pretended to smile. She and Greg Schofield had known each other since university, even dated briefly before he met his now-wife Samantha. They’d laughed together, been drunk together, slept together and, on one memorable occasion, been in a car crash together. So why did it feel like she was talking to an overfamiliar stranger?

She looked down, trying not to feel too self-conscious about how she was dressed, when her eye caught on a dull, red-green smear on her leg. There was a lurch in Diya's stomach. She wasn't sure exactly what it was or when she'd got it on her, but she was certain it was too disgusting to explain.

'How've you been?' Greg asked, and Diya realised that she'd been standing there in silence. 'It's been a while. Heard you've been having a hard time.'

'Yeah.' She paused, unsure what to do with the artificial smile she could feel plastered across her face. He hadn't seen the stain. If he had, he'd be staring at it. *Just don't draw attention to the human remains on you.*

'You still at the same job? Or have they promoted you again?'

'Uh, no.' What the hell did you say? 'I left. Had to get away, after Angie, you know?'

'Of course,' Greg said sympathetically, though it was clear he didn't know. By the look on his face, he didn't even remember who Angie was. It wasn't exactly surprising. None of Diya's other friends had really known her. They'd crossed paths, of course, but Angie had always been hers, never one of 'the gang'.

'What are you up to these days?' Diya said, that stupid smile still not shifting from her face. *Don't think about the leg.* 'Still at Hardwire?'

'Yeah, they made me a programming lead, so busy busy!' His tone was becoming more awkward by the moment, clearly sensing how strained she was feeling. 'What about you? Is this your new job?'

Don't draw his attention to the coverall. Just acknowledge it and go.

'Yup,' she said, nodding. The silence stretched out between them. 'I'm actually on a job right now, so …'

'Right, right.' He nodded. 'I'll let you get back to it, then. Oh! I was—I'm having a birthday thing next week. I texted you, but, uh …'

'Yes, of course, sorry. I need to check my calendar, but I'll let you know.'

'Great, sure. Well, hopefully see you there!'

'Yeah. See you there!'

And with that he was gone, and Diya exhaled. Deep down she knew that, not only would she not answer his texted birthday invitation, but they would probably never see each other again. Not because she didn't want to, but

because she just … wouldn’t. Her whole body still felt rigid, suffused with the awkward artificiality of pretending to be the person who she was more and more certain had died with Angie.

‘Oi!’ Xen called from the direction of the pub. ‘You get lost in there or what?’

Diya opened the van back up, grabbed the bucket, and headed to join the others.

There was a police officer watching them from the other side of the car park. At least, Diya was pretty certain they were police. At this distance, under the shade of the trees, it was hard to say for certain. It was certainly a masculine outline, wearing some form of uniform, and though she couldn’t quite make out the face beneath the shape of a helmet, Diya had a deep certainty that the figure was watching her. Maybe it was one of the people who had found the body the night before, come to check up on things, maybe work through some of their own feelings on mortality. Diya had certainly seen enough of those types by now. But they had been on the job for a few hours and the figure hadn’t moved. It unsettled her, though she couldn’t pin down the exact reason why. Beyond the obvious, of course.

The pressure washer stopped and Diya turned to see Xen pulling back her mask and grabbing a cigarette from her bag. They’d got into something of a routine over the last month or two; Diya had never been a smoker herself, but those long, black cigarettes Xen was partial to smelled really good. They had a deep, rich tobacco scent that reminded Diya of the cigars her father had smoked when she was a child. Now she often found herself taking breaks alongside Xen, chatting nonsense and enjoying the second-hand smoke.

‘Is that OK?’ Diya asked, gesturing to the filthy water flowing into the metal grate.

‘What?’ Xen looked over.

‘Just washing it down the drain like that.’

‘It all goes to the sewers.’

‘I guess. I just thought there were laws and restrictions about biological waste disposal and stuff.’

‘Sure, but it’s all a bit easier when you can just wash it down the drain.’

‘And that’s … legal?’

‘Yup. Human and animal blood, and other liquids, you can just wash down the drain. You’ve still got to disinfect everywhere they’ve been, but yeah – it’s a lot easier.’

‘Huh.’

That sort of made sense, Diya supposed. It was closing on midday now, and even though the air was cool with the approaching autumn, the sun was bright. Most of the smell had either washed away or been covered by the chemicals doing their work, and Xen’s portable speakers were blasting an almost relaxing black metal drone. If someone had told her when they arrived that she’d be feeling hungry for lunch, Diya would have laughed in their face, but as it was she was rather looking forward to Frank getting back with the sandwiches.

Only Mary, sullenly scrubbing the blood from a section of wood, seemed to be having an actively unpleasant time.

‘Can you please turn that off?’ she snapped at Xen. ‘I can’t concentrate.’

‘Sorry, sister dear.’ The speakers went silent. ‘Wouldn’t dream of leaving you unable to fully focus on your repetitive cleaning motions.’

Mary didn’t reply, just moving the cloth back and forth over the stain rhythmically, head slightly tilted as if listening.

‘God forbid,’ Xen continued, her voice needling, ‘that you should have to be distracted from cleansing—’

‘Shut up,’ Mary snapped. ‘That’s not what this is about and you know it.’

A smirk crossed Xen’s lips. Teasing Mary about ‘psychic powers’ was one of the few ways in which Diya had ever seen her be genuinely cruel. But her mind slipped back to how unsettling she’d found it when Mary had taken the locket on that first day, and she couldn’t help but wonder if perhaps there wasn’t an element of defensiveness in Xen’s derision. Certainly, having worked with Mary on several jobs now, it was already wearing on Diya, and Xen had presumably had a front row seat for years.

‘Oh, right, of course.’ Xen exhaled a cloud of smoke and shot a look at Diya. ‘Tell us what you’re sensing, then? You’re feeling an aura, maybe? How are the *vibes*?’

‘Really horrible, if you must know.’ The look on Mary’s face was one of genuine distress. ‘The man who died here was in great pain.’

‘No shit,’ Xen muttered.

‘A lost soul,’ Mary continued.

‘Fuck off.’ Xen’s voice had a slight edge now, like Mary had hit a nerve.

There was an awkward silence.

‘Sorry,’ Xen continued. ‘Just cut it with the “lost soul” shit, OK? I had a mate … They’re just people trying to get by with a bad deal, you know?’

‘I didn’t say they weren’t.’ Mary sounded defensive.

Xen flicked away her cigarette butt.

‘Just bothers me sometimes, I guess, when people talk about them like they’re … I don’t know. Can we drop it?’

‘Sure.’

With that the conversation appeared to be over, and Diya turned and went out into the car park, trying to shake the pressure that suddenly seemed to have gripped her chest. She looked over, saw Frank returning with a Tesco bag full of sandwiches, and felt her stomach groan in anticipation. Then she noticed the policeman still stood there behind him, staring. Or was it a different one? He must have finished his shift. The person was in the same spot under the tree, but seemed slightly thinner now, and taller. They still wore a uniform, although Diya couldn’t have sworn that it was exactly the same one.

‘Move along now,’ a voice hissed in her ear with such force that she gasped in sudden fright. Her mind swam with panic and she fumbled to grab her bag and get away.

‘Excuse me,’ Frank repeated, as Diya realised she hadn’t moved from his path.

‘Oh, yeah, sorry.’

She stepped out of the way. She looked over and the policeman was gone. The breeze picked up, and Diya shivered in the cold, wishing that she’d put on a few more layers under her coverall.

She returned to the others, who were now perched on the loading bay, as Frank passed round the packaged sandwiches and cans of cola. Diya grabbed a BLT and tucked in. Less than a month ago she would have recoiled at the idea of eating in a situation like this, but desensitisation was just a perk of the job. Was that right? Could you really call it a perk? Well, right now she did, at least.

Her eyes wandered around the small yard. For all Frank had told the owner seven o’clock, she was finding it hard to believe they had more than

an hour’s work ahead of them. There were still the metal barrels that needed fully cleaning, and they had all sorts of nooks and crevices of exactly the sort that tended to take—

Diya stopped, her eyes picking out something just behind one of the barrels at the back, the colour and texture slightly different from the rest of the wall. She placed her sandwich carefully on her bag and hopped down.

‘What’s up?’ Xen asked as she moved towards the barrels and put the heavy rubber gloves back on.

‘Not sure, give me a hand.’

The metal drums were far heavier than Diya had anticipated, and even with Xen and Mary helping, it took almost a full minute to shift them away from the wall.

‘Don’t worry about us, Dad,’ Xen called over sarcastically. ‘You just put your feet up and relax!’

Frank said nothing, simply puffing placidly on his pipe and watching them struggle.

Behind the drums lay a shabby green backpack. It looked like it had seen years of nearly constant use, with the straps almost entirely frayed through and one of the zips broken and warped.

‘You think this was …?’ Mary trailed off.

‘Yeah,’ Diya said.

Even through the gloves, touching the bag made her feel odd. Not because of its griminess (it was far cleaner than a lot of the stuff she’d touched today), but because it seemed like a sort of trespass. Xen and Mary looked at her expectantly, while Frank continued to observe from a distance, occasionally relighting his pipe.

Inside it were mostly clothes. Stained and torn garments with a few newer-looking tops that had clearly been picked up from a charity shop. The unimpressed eyes of Garfield stared out at her from a bright orange T-shirt, and a thin hoodie proclaimed its owner belonged to Hufflepuff house. From all of them came the sharp tang of alcohol, explained by an empty bottle of methylated spirits buried underneath, a dribble of the bright purple liquid still resting at the bottom. Finally, there was a wallet, empty except for a few copper coins, a handful of faded receipts, and a card for Beckton Globe Library, which gave the man’s name as Alan Mitchell.

Alan Mitchell. The name rattled around Diya's mind as if she knew it, though she was certain this was the first time she'd ever come across it. She shook her head, slowly, and was about to put the backpack down when she noticed something was still inside, weighing it down ever so slightly.

Reaching into the backpack for the last time, Diya pulled out a small pottery duck. It was clumsily made, with thumb marks pressed into the clay itself and the rough proportions that suggested a child's handiwork. The crude white and yellow paint job was covered with a lumpy glaze and the whole thing was really quite ugly. And yet, when she looked at it, all that swelled up in her heart was the warm glow of love. Did it remind her of something? Some similar item from her own childhood, perhaps?

She held it for a second, a deep sadness suddenly cutting through the warm feelings of affection. Her head swam and the world seemed suddenly slightly out of focus. She was so very tired. Like Alan Mitchell must have been. She imagined how badly he had just wanted to sit down, just to sit down for a moment and get his bearings, maybe even rest his head for a minute or two. The breeze would have cut through his thin coat like needles digging into her skin. And then on the bench itself, the wrought-iron radiating the icy chill that it would have taken on throughout the night, with a figure standing behind it. Tall, torso peppered with the black and white of a uniform and a helmet that seemed to fully shadow its face despite its lack of a brim. No features on its face in the dull light of the streetlamps, but a message spoken loud and clear: *No rest for the likes of you*.

The image was so vivid that it left Diya feeling drained, and she desperately wanted to get out of this courtyard, with its bleach and alcohol reek. She pressed the bag into Xen's hands with slightly more force than necessary.

'I'm uh— I need to get a bit of air.'

'Sure,' Xen said, her interest still fully on the bag, while Mary nodded as though she understood. Frank watched with that same inscrutable expression.

Diya did feel a bit better once she was outside the wooden fencing and in the open air. The area around The White Lion was silent, the car park devoid of movement once again. The cars sat there, quiet and impassive. Waiting to be loaded up and moved away to warm homes where people still lived. When had it got so cold? She moved past the shopping centre and

onto the footpath of the main road where the roar of engines greeted her. Traffic sped past in a constant stream. What was the speed limit here? Were they even allowed to go that fast?

A small park offered a slight reprieve, and as she stepped onto the unkempt grass the noise of the engines behind her faded to a dull roar. An old wooden bench stood there, among a clump of trees, with a rusty memorial plaque fastened onto its centre. The name was no longer legible, and Diya sat down, letting the fatigue of the day pass over her. She closed her eyes, just for a moment.

As she did so, she became keenly aware that she was not alone. A change in the air, a slight rustle of hateful movement. She opened her eyes and there it was: the figure in uniform.

She waited. Rest was an impossibility with every sense sharpened to the point of pain, and she felt through her whole body every sound and subtle change in this icy and frostbitten night. The panicked focus could not last forever, though, and as it faded, and the cold crept deeper into her bones, something else came with it: an all-encompassing fatigue, the heavy claws of sleep that dug into her brain and pushed her eyelids down no matter how she fought to keep them open.

No, she begged her own exhausted mind. *Not now. That's what it's waiting for.* But she felt her body slide further down the bench, now almost horizontal, and she was finally swallowed by sleep.

'Move along!' the voice cried, dragging her painfully awake again, wrenching her up off the iron by one arm.

'You can't sleep here!' another voice sneered, seizing her by the leg and dragging her down and along rough tarmac.

'Get a move on!' a third now, shoving her in a different direction to the others, making it impossible for her to figure out where or how she was as she pulled herself out of sleep.

She tried to run, only realising a second later she was still prone on the ground. Faceless, uniformed figures surrounded her now, dozens of them, their breath colder than the cutting night wind. She gripped the arm of one, wrenching herself upright, and turned to run, but there was another one already there.

'Move along!' it said dispassionately, the words knocking the wind out of her like a blow to the stomach. She ran, pushing them to the side, legs

pounding, backpack held close. They did not move to block her, but turned to follow her progress with their shadowed faces.

She had to find somewhere to sleep, somewhere new. But everywhere she ran, there they were. Standing on a street corner, watching from a shop doorway, waiting at the bottom of the subway staircase. They stood smug and patient and implacable, wry amusement wafting off them as they drove her further and further and tears cut furrows through the dirt on her face.

Another alleyway, another figure in uniform cutting off her path. She turned away, only to find herself barrelling headlong into another figure that towered over her. Beneath its crisply pressed jacket it felt like its body was made of unyielding marble, and she began to fall. A hand grabbed her by the collar and kept her upright. With terror that bordered on frenzy, she reached out wildly, thrusting her hand into the dark shadows beneath the helmet.

She felt something then that might have been a face. Its texture, at least, could almost have been called skin. Her fingers tried to grasp it, to gain some sort of purchase, and as she did the face seemed to come away in her hand, splitting like a wet paper bag and peeling away.

Below the mask was a smile that stretched from one side of the head to the other, big and bright, with teeth that seemed to run into each other without clear gaps between them.

‘Move along!’ it said, though its smile did not move. Then it laughed, releasing her suddenly. Diya spun as she fell, throwing up her hands to shield her face against the cobblestones that rushed towards her and accidentally pushing away Mary, who was gently shaking her.

‘Are you all right?’ Mary’s face was confused, but not especially worried. ‘You were gone awhile.’

Diya snapped fully awake. A dream? A dream. The wooden bench was hard and uncomfortable, and her whole body felt stiff. She shook her head.

‘Sorry, must’ve— I guess I’ve not been sleeping so well.’

Mary nodded sympathetically, then offered a hand to help her up. Diya waved it away, then pulled herself painfully to her feet. Just a dream, she told herself, following Mary back to the pub. Just a really horrible dream. The job was getting to her. Like at Crayford Road. Clearly she wasn’t quite as used to it as she had thought. But she still shivered, despite how warm the afternoon had become. And that laugh …

Her attempts to recall it in detail were drowned by the hiss of the pressure washer as Xen continued the task of sullenly hosing the place down.

‘Hey, you OK?’ she asked as the two of them approached.

‘She fell asleep on a bench,’ Mary said, before Diya had a chance to respond.

‘Ha!’ Xen laughed, not unkindly. ‘Don’t worry about it, kid, happens to the best of us.’

‘Pretty sure I’m older than you,’ Diya replied, shaking off the last shreds of her dream in the face of her smiling friend.

‘Well, that explains it. Old people need a lot of naps.’

Diya affectionately gave her the finger, and Mary headed off to continue wiping down the barrels.

‘Come on,’ Xen continued. ‘I’ll teach you how to use the pressure washer.’

‘I’ve used it a bunch of times.’

‘Fine, I’ll teach you how to use it *right*.’

The next half our was a blur of technique, angles and rotary jets. There was a satisfaction to it, though, watching the powerful stream of water slam into grime and dirt and filth, seeing it washed away under the relentless machine, leaving it scoured clean.

‘What happened to the backpack?’ Diya asked when the lesson was over, looking around and realising she was unable to see it anywhere.

‘Oh, I think Mary gave it to Dad.’ Xen shrugged. ‘He usually deals with that sort of stuff.’

‘What happens to it?’

‘Not a hundred per cent sure. I think he just hands it in.’

‘Who to?’

‘I dunno … “The Authorities”, I guess?’

They continued washing in silence for a few more minutes, lost in their own thoughts. Diya was about to say something that might even have been a joke when Frank’s phone burst into life, a tinny rendition of *Comfortably Numb* by Pink Floyd. For a moment, her boss looked oddly frozen in place, as though unsure whether or not to answer the call in front of them, before he pressed the answer key, turning away as he did so.

‘Yeah? … Yeah … I know … Well, yeah … No, it’s not … I didn’t … I just told you I didn’t. … Of course not … Yeah, of course I will … Fine.’

He turned away as the conversation continued, and the other two went back to their jobs, but Diya found herself shuffling a bit closer. There was something in Frank’s voice that she hadn’t heard before. It almost sounded like fear. He tapped the screen again, ending the call, and caught Diya’s eye.

‘I don’t like being eavesdropped.’

‘Sorry.’ She felt herself flushing with shame. He was right, that hadn’t been OK. ‘It won’t happen again.’

He grunted, not quite mollified, but not angry enough to push it.

‘I heard it too,’ Xen called. ‘You gonna get shirty with me as well?’

Frank ignored her, instead heading through the wide wooden gates, back over towards the car park and the van.

‘That was Mr Bill, wasn’t it?’ Xen pushed. ‘This is another of his fucking jobs, isn’t it?’

Frank Slough stopped. He didn’t turn around.

‘I said we don’t want to be on any more jobs you get from that prick.’ Xen sounded more serious than Diya had heard her.

‘And I said no-one gets to pick and choose what jobs they do,’ Frank said. ‘You’re free to quit if you want.’

He started to walk away.

‘Yeah, sure I am,’ Xen muttered, but her father was already out of earshot. She turned to Diya. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘Who’s Bill?’

‘Mr Bill? Just this dickhead keeps pushing jobs our way. Dad always takes them ‘’cause they pay real well.’

‘Right.’ Diya wasn’t sure whether to point out that she didn’t know how they actually *got* jobs, given she was only called in once they’d been hired.

‘Normally it’s individuals,’ Xen said, intuiting her question, ‘like, uh … Like you were.’

A sudden, sharp pang. It passed.

‘Yeah, just folks needing cleaning find our details, give us a call. Then there’s organisations: hotel chains, cops’ – said with a slight sneer – ‘that kinda thing. They usually have one point of contact for companies like ours, so you want to be on good terms with them, as they can give you a lot of work.’

‘And Mr Bill is one of these?’

‘Yeah. Don’t know who he represents, but the jobs always suck.’

‘But they pay well?’

‘Well enough for Dad, I guess.’

Diya could feel another question bubbling up, the one she hadn’t quite felt comfortable asking yet. The one she wasn’t entirely comfortable asking now, but as the silence stretched out, broken only by the sound of water hissing onto the ground, it seemed to come inevitably to her lips.

‘Xen …’

‘Mhm?’

‘Why did you give me this job?’

‘What do you mean?’ Xen seemed momentarily confused. ‘I mean, you lost your job, we needed another pair of hands, I guess it just kind of made sense.’

‘Really? I’ve never done anything like it before, none of you really know me, and I’m not … Y’know, family.’

‘Yeah …’ Xen conceded. ‘I guess it is a bit weird.’

‘So, what happened?’

There was a pause before the answer, as Xen seemed to really think about it.

‘I don’t know. I mean, we’d been trying to convince Dad to take someone else on ever since we lost George, and he said he would when he found the right person.’

‘And I was the right person?’

‘I guess? I’m not going to pretend it wasn’t a surprise when he suggested you, but I wasn’t going to argue with a chance to hang out more. Plus, I figured it would mean more time with Winston.’

Xen smiled, clearly hoping it was the end of the questions.

‘And it was Frank who decided to offer me the job? Why? After that weird interview I really thought he was taking me on under duress.’

‘I … I don’t know. It’s hard to explain. He does this sort of thing sometimes, kinda going with his gut? If he’s got, like, an instinct about something or someone he’ll just go for it, take a big swing on it if he has to. I guess he must’ve had a feeling about you. It’s a good thing. When he does this sort of thing it usually goes pretty well.’

Diya said nothing, considering her words.

‘Why do you think he offered you the job?’ Xen asked.

‘Suppose I thought it was probably out of pity.’

‘Ha!’ Xen’s harsh laugh caught Diya by surprise. ‘I wouldn’t worry about that. Dad doesn’t do pity. Not like that, at least. And it’s not like we don’t meet dozens of people a month who deserve our pity as much as you do. No, that’s not it.’

‘OK.’ Diya felt oddly relieved. ‘Thanks, Xen.’

‘And like I said, we were struggling a bit with just the three of us, and I really thought it was going to be a while before Dad— Ah, speak of the devil.’

‘You ladies still on break?’ Frank said, as he emerged from the back door.

‘Only *some* of us,’ Mary called over, a little bit petulantly.

‘Come on,’ Frank said. ‘Not much left before we can all head home. Unless you want to stick around here?’

‘No, thank you,’ Xen said. ‘Very keen to move on from here to somewhere I might actually *want* to have a drink!’

Diya tried to muster up the energy to ask more, but Xen had already returned to scrubbing the metal beer barrels. She sighed to herself, pulled her mask back up and returned to work.

5

Traces

Seven o'clock turned out to have been a very conservative estimate, and one that Diya privately suspected Frank might have come up with solely to irritate The White Lion's owner. As it was, they were done and packed away by three in the afternoon. The others piled into the van, but she found herself hanging back.

'You not coming?' Frank called from the driver's seat.

'… No.' Diya searched for an excuse. 'I thought I'd stick around for a drink.'

Xen's eyebrows jerked up as she looked back at the bleak, squat building. 'Right, in this charming local inn,' she said, clearly not believing a word, but not wanting to push it. 'Well, be careful.' She leaned in for a stage whisper. 'I hear somebody died there.'

Diya froze, though her friend didn't seem to notice.

'See you then,' Frank said. And away they went, leaving Diya standing there, alone in the car park.

Why had she wanted to stay behind? There was something here, a nagging feeling that she'd left something unfinished, and she was absolutely certain that she wasn't going to be able to rest until she had figured out what it was. Not that rest was an easy option for her right now anyway. At the very least it would be something new to distract her. She didn't exactly have much insight into what she might be looking for, or how she would go about finding it. But that ghoulish curiosity had risen inside her once again.

She wandered over to the doors of the now open-for-business White Lion, looking through the dingy glass. *Did* she want to get a drink here?

The stools were already occupied by a few folks who looked exactly as you'd expect them to look, given they were propping up a bar at three o'clock on a Monday afternoon. There was nothing for her here.

Perhaps some fresh air would help her mood. Get her away from this dismal place. Diya wandered around the residential sideroads, letting herself get lost. Eventually, she found that she had looped around to the same small, grassy area as earlier. It was less deserted now, with a dog-walker pulling along a distracted Labrador, some children just out of school kicking a football about, and an unremarkable man in a grey overcoat reading a newspaper as he leaned against a tree. And off to the side was that old wooden bench where she'd had the weird dream.

She'd been putting off thinking about it, focusing on the job at hand, but the uncomfortable thoughts couldn't be avoided any longer. Diya went over and sat back down. A dream. That's all it could have been. No ozone to blame this time, though. Plus, she hadn't been asleep at the Crayford Road job, and it had felt just the same. So what was it? Some sort of weird panic attack? Some sort of grief-fuelled psychotic episode? That last one sounded the most like something she could accept. She'd done plenty of reading about bereavement these last months, and the effects that extreme grief could have on the body and mind were staggering. No-one on the forums had mentioned anything quite like this, but then Diya doubted that anyone else on there was regularly clearing away the corpses of strangers.

She had thought she was getting better, that the pain was starting to level out. It might be years before she felt normal again, and it would always be with her, but the last few weeks she had found herself smiling more, even laughing sometimes. But with these … What to call them? They weren't quite dreams, but she recoiled from calling them hallucinations. Episodes? That just about worked. These two episodes might mean she wasn't dealing with it as well as she had thought. Was she processing her feelings, or was she fracturing under the weight? And what had set them off? A lonely hoarder and an unhoused alcoholic. Two people who had fallen through the cracks, existing beyond where society cared to look.

Or it could just be a coincidence. Diya could almost hear her father telling her with a conspiratorial smile (usually when he lost his keys): 'Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action.' She smiled at the memory, his gentle accent trilling the r in 'three'. Fine

then. For now it was coincidence, but she should be prepared for it to happen again.

She could quit, of course. At least in theory. Probably should, if the work was pushing her towards some sort of breakdown, but the fact that these last two times had happened when Diya was on a job didn't necessarily mean they were definitely tied to it. If she quit and then started having dreams of the dead while shopping in WHSmith, she'd have given up a well-paying job for nothing, not to mention her only real support network aside from her parents. And Diya hadn't even been able to bring herself to tell them about her new job, yet. Or that she'd lost her old one, which had at the very least had a somewhat impressive title. She was very careful not to actually lie to them, but instead of a web of lies she was now caught in a void of truth, where she could talk about basically no part of her actual life without revealing something she'd rather they didn't know.

Getting to her feet, Diya checked her watch. Four o'clock, and still there was this infuriating restlessness. She turned over every step of the job in her mind. The clean-up, the dream, the backpack … There was something about it that she couldn't quite let go of. She wanted to know more about this man who had met his end in a grimy pub storage area. Was it merely morbid voyeurism? Or was there some other reason she couldn't let go? She shied away from the thought.

Likely, it was just a touch of lingering guilt. She still felt like she had failed the old woman from Crayford Road by not remembering her name, that Diya had let her memory die when there was no-one else left who cared for her. Perhaps this man had no-one too. Whatever the reason, she felt almost … obligated to find out more about the dead man. Who was he? How did he live?

Then she remembered the library card. How far away was that library? The card had looked well-worn, which might mean well-used. She pulled up a map on her phone. Ten minutes' walk. Might be worth checking out. It wasn't as if she'd had any luck sitting on a bench and waiting for something to happen.

Not that that's what she was doing. Obviously, that would be ridiculous.

Beckton Globe Library was a bright, modern-looking building with big glass windows either side of a protruding rounded front. Diya didn't go to all that many libraries in her day-to-day life, and so in her mind they were

all grand old structures constructed from red bricks and stained mahogany, with austere busts of indistinguishable distinguished white men staring out with expressions of haughty approval at how many books surrounded them. Whenever she found herself in an actual public library, with spaced out white bookshelves of trashy paperbacks and grey carpet tiles that reminded her of the last office she worked at, it left her a little bit bewildered.

She went in anyway, nodding at the middle-aged man behind the desk. He didn't acknowledge her, instead concentrating on his task, which seemed to involve some little cards on the inside covers of a huge stack of reference books that towered next to him. Diya wandered through the fiction section, not entirely sure what she was looking for. Her eyes flicked over the racks of books without taking in any of the words. It was warm in here, a pleasant change from the cold wind outside, and her fingers tingled gently as the chill faded from them.

She found a small open reading area of sofas and soft chairs and sat down. The heating vent was set into the ceiling directly overhead and the gentle flow of hot air seemed to relax her as she sank into one of the chairs. This was nice. It beat going home, at any rate, and spending another silent evening in an empty flat, staring at the television screen and taking nothing in. There were people here, not talking or laughing, but just quietly being. As the cold left her bones, fatigue moved in to replace it, and she felt her eyes close as she settled into the comfortable seat.

As soon as she did, something clicked into place. She had found the man's refuge. A place he could be warm and safe, if only for a few hours. There was a sudden feeling of connection, tinged with a new sort of sadness. That wasn't quite everything, though. Diya scanned the area around her seat, her gaze settling at last on a small bank of computer terminals over in one of the corners.

She got slowly out of the soft chair and moved over to the desks. Only one of them was currently occupied, by a young woman who seemed to be browsing college courses. The computers were several years old, with bulky white plastic towers and chunky monitors that were only flat screen in the technical sense of the word. Each of them had a screensaver for 'Newham Library Services' in black and white. Diya sat down at the one furthest from the young woman and shifted the mouse slightly.

The machine thought for a second or two before the screensaver disappeared, giving way to a library server login screen. The fan in the computer tower began to whir its worn blades like it was trying to achieve lift-off, the rumbling noise cutting through the near-silent library like a growl. Diya tried to ignore it, looking instead at the login screen, which requested a card number and a password.

Damn. Did she remember the number on the man's library card? Of course she didn't, why would she have memorised that? And it was gone now, taken along with the backpack and given to 'the authorities', whoever they might be in this case. Perhaps she could ask the man behind the desk about him, get some details. But that would mean explaining, well, everything, and it wasn't as though she had much explanation to begin with. She could at least ask if they recognised the man's name. Wait, what *was* his name? Diya knew she'd seen it. She'd even made a point to try and remember it. But when she tried to reach for it, her thoughts seemed to just skip over it, like it had never been there. She kicked herself, guilt swirling up through her once again, as though by forgetting both of their names now she had let them die all over again.

She closed her eyes and sighed, then looked once again at the login screen. With a start she saw that the card number and password fields were already filled in. How had she not noticed that? They must have auto-filled, somehow. Not exactly very secure, but Diya somehow doubted that Beckton Globe Library was top of the target list for cyber-criminals. Still, the chances that these auto-filled details were those of the dead man were slim to none. Right? Diya hit 'Enter'.

The desktop was sparse, just a generic Windows XP background with an icon for Firefox, one for the library's digital catalogue, and the recycle bin. It wasn't immediately clear whether each login had their own profile or whether all logins let you access the same desktop. Unsure what she was looking for, Diya opened up the documents folder, but it was almost entirely empty. The internet bookmarks didn't help either, as it looked like they were set up by the library to direct the user to various local council or government sites. Finally, she clicked on the recycle bin. Inside were a few maps and screenshots that had been saved months ago, and a single Notepad file that was simply labelled 'HELP'.

The sound of the roaring computer fan seemed to fade away as she clicked on the little icon and a short message filled the centre of the screen.

> They are here again. I think they're chasing me I really thought I'd got rid of them. Its been months I think but here they are again and this time I think it is for real. I can't sleep they won't let me just chasing me and pushing me and laughing at me. I hate that laugh. When I do sleep for a bit its still there because I can't not dream about it. The drink doesn't help anymore and I don't know what to do if I try to tell people they'll say its the police or something but its not just them its all of them they don't want me to be here. They don't want me to be alive and there's nowhere they'll let me be. I know you won't find this Leanne or read this but if you do I'm so sorry. You were right to go and I just wish that I could see you again and please tell Lexi that I love her. I still have the duck. I'm so sorry. I need help but there's no-one here. There's no-one anywhere anymore. Just them. And that laugh. I'm so scared. I know

Diya stared at the words on the screen, trying to understand exactly what she was reading. Were these the last words of the man they had just finished hosing off a pub loading area? The idea seemed grotesque. She checked the file information. Last modified yesterday afternoon.

A new sort of guilt came over her. This poor man had clearly been suffering, hounded by problems he couldn't outrun, almost certainly because they were inside him, and here was Diya using him as a distraction from her own sadness. Leering like his pain and fear were there for her edification, or to make her feel better that 'at least it wasn't her', and not simply the awful experiences of a victim let down by the world in which he lived.

Diya sighed and started to get up from the computer. As she did so, though, she noticed a change in the text. The 'w' had vanished from the end of 'know'. She leaned closer. Then the 'o' was gone. Then the 'n'. Then the whole rest of the word. Before she realised what was happening the whole final line was gone, disappearing before the rapidly retreating text cursor. It was being deleted. Diya watched, unsure what to do as another line evaporated, then another. She reached out and hit the space bar, holding it down. For a moment the cursor froze in place, like she was in an invisible battle against the stream of deletion. This was absurd, what was she supposed to do? She couldn't sit here pressing the keyboard forever. She didn't even understand what was happening. Under her finger a pressure seemed to be building, the space bar pressing against her, trying to rise as

she held it down with more and more of her strength, holding on to the last trace of this poor man's life.

There was a faint electric *pop* from deep inside the computer tower and the screen went black. Diya stared at it in disbelief, pressing the power button a couple of times, trying to coax the machine back into life, but there was no response. This wasn't fair. She shifted chairs, moving to the next terminal over, shaking the mouse to dismiss the screensaver and staring at another login screen. She placed her hands over the keyboard, willing the computer to log her in, to repeat whatever had happened before. Nothing.

Diya sat there for almost ten minutes, trying not to dwell on the fact that the nagging, unfinished feeling that had driven her to seek out the library was now gone. The thing inside her that had pushed her here finally seemed satisfied. And she couldn't even remember the dead man's name.

6

Dinner

It was always so warm in her parents' house. The moment the year tripped over into October the windows were closed and the heating came on, regardless of the actual temperature outside. Diya had raised it with her father once, and he'd shrugged, saying that he couldn't be bothered with turning it off and on all the time, keeping track of it all. Also, her mother got cold very easily, or so he had claimed. Diya had never once heard her mother complain about the temperature, but then again, she'd never really heard her mother complain.

Still, as she sat across the dining room table from the two of them, she couldn't stop thinking about how stifling the air was. It had never bothered her this badly before. Had it really been so long since she'd actually spent any time with them? They ate in a silence that none of them wanted to be awkward, her father occasionally coughing as though it was an invitation for someone else to speak, but Diya couldn't quite figure out anything to say. Nothing that came to mind seemed like appropriate talk for over dinner, or even something she wanted to share, so she half-heartedly pushed chickpeas around a bowl and tried to convey with body language that she was having a pleasant evening. Or at the very least that she wasn't regretting coming to visit, which her mind was screaming that she very much was. They'd never been close, certainly not as close as her mother wished that they were, but this was something new.

'Not hungry?' her mother asked, breaking the silence.

'I'm sorry, I had a big lunch.'

'I'm worried about you. You're losing weight. You look so thin, just bones, doesn't she, Salman?'

‘I think she looks lovely,’ her father said, eyes not straying from his food.

‘That’s not what I said, I said she was too thin.’

‘Ma, I’m fine.’ Diya could hear the petulant teenage note in her voice and she hated it.

‘Well, she’s not having an easy time, is she?’ her dad said, giving his wife a meaningful look.

‘Of course. Sorry, Diya, I just, I see you not eating and looking like that, and I worry.’

‘It’s OK. I get it.’

There was a long pause.

‘Have you talked to Sanjana recently?’ her mother asked. ‘She said she had sent you an invitation. James is very keen to do all the baby things, so they’re having a baby shower. Do you think you’ll go?’

‘Uh, yeah,’ Diya said with almost sincere interest. ‘She said she’d already invited me?’

‘Facebook,’ her father decreed. He paused for a second, before announcing. ‘It’s how people arrange these things now.’

‘Right, that explains … I haven’t been very good at keeping on top of online stuff recently. I keep forgetting to check.’

‘You’ll be there, then?’ her mother pressed. ‘James is very keen for you to come.’

‘I thought James didn’t like me?’ Diya said.

‘*You* don’t like *James*,’ her father corrected her.

‘That’s not true.’

‘I thought you said he was boring,’ he continued, the faintest hint of a smirk playing at his lips. ‘Like a human cardigan, you said.’

‘Diya!’ Her mother sounded scandalised. ‘You did not say that? About your own brother-in-law?’

‘Of course I didn’t,’ she lied. ‘He’s just making things up.’

Her father took a small sip of water and said nothing.

‘So, Baba,’ Diya tried to change the subject. ‘What are you reading at the moment?’

The quiet groan from her mother told her she’d hit gold.

‘It’s very interesting. About Operation Barbarossa. They got a lot of declassified accounts given by Soviet soldiers and officers at the time and

translated them. It puts the early days of the Eastern Front into a whole new light. The sheer scale of Stalin's mobilisation—'

'All right, dear,' her mother said, shooting Diya a look as she gathered up the dishes. 'I'm sure you could just lend it to her when you're done. You wouldn't want to spoil the plot.'

'Of World War Two?'

She saw her father smile to himself and for a moment Diya felt comfortable here. Perhaps they had never been particularly close, but this house had always been a place of peace for her before. Even on those few occasions as a youth when the Burmans had really butted heads with their daughter, usually over something Angie had done or was planning to do, it had never led to anything approaching an actual argument. For a moment Diya felt like she was home.

'Have you got another flatmate, yet?'

The words were thrown back so casually from the direction of the dishwasher that it took a moment for them to sink in. Diya's stomach dropped.

'N-no, Ma, I don't.'

'Well, you shouldn't wait too long.'

'I—'

'Ritu, she's clearly not ready to talk about it.' Her father's voice was softer than she was used to.

'I know, but … That place isn't cheap, Diya. I just— I worry. Do you need money? We don't have much but—'

'It's fine, I'm doing OK. I can afford to stay.'

'Oh?' Her father's eyebrows lifted slightly.

'You can't keep living out of savings.'

'I'm not,' Diya assured her. 'I …'

They watched her with expectation.

'I have a … new job. It pays much better.'

'Better than a "Digital and Marketing Lead"?' Her father sounded impressed.

'Market Communications. And I keep telling you the title is more impressive than the salary.'

'Still …'

‘I can’t believe you didn’t tell us,’ her mother exclaimed. ‘Taking the next step in your career like this, we should have been the first to know!’

Something in the pride of her tone set Diya’s teeth on edge, and she suddenly wanted to tell them everything. To tell them all about her job, all the grisly details of blood and shit and rotting remains scooped up and hosed down. She wanted to see her mother turn faint and her father try to keep his face impassive as she described to them what she did for a living. They would hate it. And suddenly Diya was very tired. She simply couldn’t face it, not tonight. She just needed them to move on.

‘Well …’ She fumbled for an explanation that wasn’t a complete lie. She’d learned the hard way that she struggled to actually lie to her parents. ‘I wasn’t sure I was going to stick with it … It’s taking a lot out of me. More than I thought.’

Her father nodded understandingly.

‘A manager, then. Not a moment too soon. Who are you working for?’

‘It’s … a smaller company. Local.’

Diya felt the net tightening and steeled herself to tell them anyway.

Her handbag buzzed.

‘Is that your phone?’ her mother asked.

The relief that flooded through Diya left her almost light-headed as she fumbled to retrieve it. A photo of Xen’s face smirked out from the screen, as if well aware of how perfectly timed her intervention was.

‘It’s work,’ Diya said. ‘I’ve got to take this.’

Her parents looked at each other as she picked up.

‘Hey, what’s the situation?’ She did her best to sound professional. Like she was talking to someone from a Proper Business. Wait, did she not think of Slough & Sons as—

‘The *situation,*’ Xen’s voice was irritated, ‘is that we got work.’

‘What, now?’

‘Yeah, *apparently* it’s kinda time sensitive and can’t wait. You at home? We’ll pick you up.’

‘No, I’m … out.’

‘Shit. Whereabouts?’

She told Xen the address, and without further ado the call was over. Diya smiled apologetically at her parents.

‘I’m so sorry, that was work. I’ve got to go.’

‘Now?’ Her mother shook her head. ‘Don’t be ridiculous, it’s nearly 9pm.’

‘Now, Ritu.’ Her father gave her an understanding nod. ‘I’m sure Diya wouldn’t be going if it wasn’t important. Is it some sort of crisis?’

‘It sounded pretty urgent.’

There was a hint of pride in her father’s eyes, and a sense of reassurance that their daughter was going to be OK. That they had done their duty as parents, and she had landed on her feet. Diya felt like a complete stranger.

‘Cleaning up someone else’s mess, no doubt?’ he said.

‘Yeah. That’s the job.’

The wind had picked up, but Diya stepped a little way away from her parents’ house anyway. She didn’t want them seeing the name on the van. Just another thing she couldn’t talk to them about. When Angie had died, they’d made the right noises, tried to comfort her, but then her mother had made a comment that made it clear she thought Angie had killed herself, and just like that it was laid bare exactly how her parents had seen Angie, their relationship, everything on which Diya had tried to build her life. They’d talked since, but never like they used to. And her parents never mentioned Angie by name.

A pair of headlights flashed at her, breaking Diya out of her musings. Mary waved to her out of the passenger window of the van, and she jogged over.

‘You look nice,’ Mary said. ‘What’s the occasion?’

‘Dinner with my parents.’

‘What? Xen, you didn’t say—’

‘I didn’t know,’ Xen protested.

‘It’s fine,’ Diya cut them off, sliding open the side door and climbing inside. ‘You kinda did me a favour.’

‘Oh, seriously?’ Xen leaned round in her seat to look back at her. ‘That bad?’

‘They’re fine. They’re nice. It’s not … I’m just having a hard time talking to them.’

‘About this?’ Mary asked, gesturing at the equipment and chemicals in the back with Diya. There was a slight sadness in her voice, and what sounded like genuine understanding.

‘Yeah. I’ll figure it out, though,’ Diya said, deciding this drive was not the time to get into it. ‘What’s the job?’

‘Building collapse.’ Frank’s voice came from the front seat.

‘Sorry, what? A building just collapsed?’ Diya couldn’t hide her incredulity.

‘Not a whole building. Front part of a flat, sounds like. Fire service and the rest are already there, but they need the street outside cleared of debris asap and they want us there in case there’s—’

‘Squashed guy chunks,’ Xen chimed in merrily.

‘—biological material. A man was crushed to death.’

‘Right.’ Diya sat back, a little bit unnerved.

‘Don’t worry.’ Mary smiled at her. ‘This is a first for me as well.’

‘Not me,’ Xen said. ‘I was with Dad and George on a crush job a few years back. Warehouse on the Isle of Dogs. That one killed three and—’

‘We’re here,’ Frank said, as he pulled up to a line of traffic cones and a sign that announced the road was closed.

7

The Cottage Grove Job

Emergency lights flashed from around the corner, and Diya hopped out of the van to get a better look. Cottage Grove was a series of long buildings, cut horizontally into an upper and lower apartment, each of which had two floors. The end of the closest building was gone, replaced by what seemed at first glance to be just a pile of bricks, but on looking closer turned out to be a large chunk of the flat above that had somehow fallen through into the one below.

The others climbed out of the van as Diya skirted round the side to get a little closer.

‘Hell of a thing, isn’t it?’ a voice came from beside her. She turned to see an older man with patchy greying hair over dark black skin, shaking his head.

‘You live here?’

‘Unless they condemn the whole place, sure.’ He pointed to one of the flats a few units down from the collapse. ‘And I wouldn’t put it past them.’

‘Well, hopefully it’s just a weird accident,’ Diya said as she pulled on her Tyvek suit. It was odd to put it on over her dinner-with-parents outfit, but she didn’t have anything else.

‘I heard them say someone was killed,’ the old man said. There was genuine concern in his voice, but Diya could also see the twinkle of gossip in his eyes.

It probably wasn’t for her to say, but the four people in plastic suits and cleaning gear gave it away somewhat. ‘Yeah, the guy who lived there, I think.’

‘Huh?’ It was hard to read his expression in the flashing lights of emergency vehicles, but it didn’t sound like that was what he expected to hear.

‘That a surprise?’

‘It is to me.’ The man shrugged. ‘The flat up top was vacant, I know that much. Has been since the Everetts moved out. And Marjorie always did swear blind someone lived in the one downstairs. Said she heard noises from there sometimes. But I know everyone round here and I never saw anyone. Suppose she was right, though. I’m never going to hear the end of this.’

‘Maybe he didn’t go out much.’

‘Oh, he *definitely* didn’t go out much if I didn’t see him. Anyway, I’ll leave you to your work.’

The old man nodded behind Diya, and she saw Frank waving for her. She finished sealing up her suit and headed over to where he was waiting with Xen and Mary, having a hurried conversation with a square-jawed woman in a fire brigade uniform.

‘—rest of the structure seems to be sound. We’ve done as full a check as we can. Best we can tell something must have weakened the interior floors, put a lot of weight on it, eventually it just collapsed. Might be a burst pipe, but didn’t see much water damage. Best guess is the guy downstairs was trying to put in some home improvements and it went … Well, really wrong.’

‘We should be safe, then?’ Frank asked.

‘I’d stay out of the main structure until tomorrow when we can get it fully checked and signed off on, but you should be fine to do the outside and the street, which is the urgent part. We’ve set an area aside for general debris, so anything uncontaminated you can drop over there, we’ll get it picked up later.’

‘Do we know who died?’ Mary’s voice was quiet, and Diya couldn’t pick up whether sympathy or curiosity was winning.

‘Well …’ The woman checked a clipboard. ‘The ambulance already took most of the body. Wasn’t much the paramedics could do for him and, to be honest, I don’t think identification’s going to be easy given the state of it. But the flat’s owned by a Joshua Bryce, so we’re working under the assumption it’s him you’re going to be, uh …’

‘Scraping up?’ Xen volunteered.

‘Sure.’ The firefighter gave her a slightly unsettled look. ‘Anyway, you need much more from me?’

‘No.’ Frank shook his head. ‘We should be all right to get started. You sticking around?’

‘Not me,’ she replied. ‘But I’m leaving a crew here to keep an eye on things in case there’s any further problems, and there’ll be a police car to keep away nosy neighbours. That do for you?’

Frank shrugged. ‘More than we usually get.’

The rest of that night was mostly sweeping. The larger chunks of debris had already been removed, so most of what littered the street in front of the building was smaller chunks of brick, plaster and a lot of broken glass. They were fully suited up, although it became clear to Diya pretty quickly that they’d been brought in at this stage mainly as a precaution. Xen seemed to think one of the firefighters had found a tooth when they were doing initial clean-up of the street and had got them in to finish up in case there was more human tissue. Even if that was the case there didn’t seem to be any more of it. Certainly, Diya didn’t see anything in the two hours or so they were at the scene that first night, save for a few dark spots on the pavement that could theoretically have been blood, but could just as easily have been any one of the numerous other things that marked a residential urban street. Either way, once the sweeping was done, which took no small amount of time, the pressure washer would come out and eliminate all trace of it.

The tedious part was checking the larger chunks of wood and brick, making sure there was no biological contamination before throwing them on the pile of rubble. There was never any on the ones that Diya was checking, but the dim streetlamps that surrounded them didn’t give quite enough light to be certain of that, so every time she had to carry them over to the higher power work lights set up around the edges and turn them over and over until she was certain. The whole thing felt surreal. As much as she had started to settle into the job, between the fight with her parents, the lights, the rubble, and the hour, this one was really messing with Diya’s head. It didn’t help that she was finding it hard to move fully past the White Lion job from the month before, and though she’d had no more weird

dreams or episodes, there was now a certain amount of trepidation when she encountered a scene like this.

Gradually the crowd of onlookers thinned out, but there was a core of a dozen or so who seemed intent on watching the whole process, standing on their front porches and peeking out of windows. There was even a woman across the road who brought out a folding chair and a thermos, setting herself up a little viewing station. It made Diya deeply self-conscious, and she kept her safety goggles and mask on even when she stepped away for a short break, uncomfortable with the idea of these people seeing more of her face than was necessary.

Near the end of that first night, Diya found herself examining a rather jagged-looking wooden beam that protruded several feet from the shattered living room window. It stuck out into the street at about chest height and was a pretty clear potential hazard for any future passers-by. She checked the end of it: no blood, no markings, nothing to indicate contamination. She gripped the end in her sturdy gloves and tried to pull it out. It barely shifted at all. She paused for a second, gathered her strength, and pulled again, almost losing her footing and moving it barely an inch. Seeing her difficulty, Frank made his way over without a word and grabbed it alongside her. He nodded, and together they strained to get it out through the window. Still no luck.

‘Right,’ Frank grunted. ‘Too much on the other end, looks like. Go and check. If we can’t shift it, we’ll have to get a saw from the van.’

Diya was about to protest about being the one sent inside the partially collapsed house until she looked at the door more closely and realised the warped entrance was now too narrow to accommodate Frank’s width.

‘You want me to ask Mary to go instead?’ he asked. There was no admonishment or irritation in his voice, but Diya felt a sudden desire to prove herself, to show she was a team player. These last few weeks she’d finally felt like she understood the job and was actually contributing, not just observing, but Frank’s attitude towards her hadn’t changed. She ignored the part of her brain that pointed out that trying to get an overt show of respect or appreciation from Frank Slough was a fool’s errand.

Diya crouched down slightly, doing her best to avoid catching any part of her coverall on the broken wooden frame of the doorway. She flicked on the torch Frank had given her and scanned the beam around. It wasn’t quite

as bad as she'd expected. The hallway itself was almost undamaged, and the majority of the house seemed to be intact, though the deep cracks that ran through the walls and ceiling were certainly a bit concerning. It was only towards the living room that the place looked like a bomb had hit it. Although she could see where the other end of the wooden beam was buried, to actually get there Diya had to drop down onto her hands and knees, crawling through the narrow spaces left by the collapse.

'*Squeeze …*'

Diya froze. The voice seemed right in her ear, not muffled by the material of her hood, or the dense mass of collapsed ceiling that was next to her head. She turned, trying to find who'd spoken, but all she saw was a chunk of textured plaster and a few chipped bricks. She waited, letting her heart rate return to normal, listening to see if it would come again.

'Hello?'

There was no response from further inside the rubble. Was there someone trapped? For a moment she imagined herself, lying there crushed and bleeding, weakly calling for assistance, desperately passing in and out of consciousness. But no, the rescue workers had been very thorough, and had assured them that there was nobody alive in here. And beyond that, the voice hadn't sounded distressed or in pain. It had sounded … gleeful. And malicious.

'Is there anyone there?' Diya called again.

'Everything OK?' came Frank's voice from outside. 'You stuck?'

'No.' She pushed the voice to the back of her mind. 'I'm good.'

Diya moved on, crawling over to where the board stuck out. The remains of a wardrobe from the room above lay broken just next to it, and for a moment she was worried it was buried too deeply under the heavy furniture, but getting closer she saw it was only caught up in a thick cable.

'How's it looking?' Frank called.

'Give me a sec.' She uncoiled the cable and shifted the board slightly. 'Try now!'

There was a grunt from the other side of the doorway and the board came free and disappeared outside. It was only then that Diya realised she'd actually been removing a sturdy piece of electrical wire. Had they turned off the power? If not, she had narrowly escaped electrocution. She probably wouldn't mention it to Frank.

She crawled back the way she'd come, retracing her crouched steps. Without the board in the way she didn't need to squeeze quite as much as on the way in, but it felt worse, somehow: the place seemed darker, the debris sharper, and it felt even harder to breathe through her dust mask than usual. She wasn't claustrophobic, and had in fact always quite liked small spaces, but the worry that there was someone else in there with her hadn't fully dissipated.

Then something caught her by the shoulder. Panic surged through Diya's body, which wanted to thrash and kick, but was too hemmed in on all sides by wreckage. Something was in the rubble with her. She was just about to scream for help at the top of her lungs when she realised her Tyvek suit had got snagged on a loose nail.

Diya kicked herself for letting the place get to her like that and took a moment to steady her breathing. Soon enough she made it to where she could stand at full height in the hallway, and felt her spine uncoiling. She turned and headed back towards the front door, gently rolling her shoulders to try and loosen them up a little bit.

At the threshold, just before she slid through the narrow gap and out into the night, she stopped. Her foot hovered in mid-air, as if unable to step over some invisible line, and her whole body shook as she was gripped by terror. She couldn't go out there. There was a hard, painful lump in her throat and the thought of stepping out into the world overwhelmed her with dizziness. Across the street, she could see the people watching the doorway, waiting for her. Their eyes seemed to reflect the light like cats and glinted with a cruel expectation. They smiled like sharks, waiting for her. The gentle breeze that had been present all evening became a screaming night wind, and she knew if she went outside she would be overwhelmed. This was different to the panic she had felt when climbing through the rubble or hearing the voice hissing at her. This was a deep physical anxiety that made her shake. She put her foot down.

Immediately the sensation left her. She took a moment to collect herself. It had felt so personal, though, so strong. Diya tried to step over the threshold again, and this time nothing stopped her.

She was back outside, under the work lights and street lamps, surrounded by the noise of semi-hushed conversations and the whoosh of

the pressure washer scouring the tarmac clean. She took off her mask and drank in the cool night air as Frank came over to her.

‘Good work,’ he said with a curt nod.

‘Thank you.’ Diya was a little bit taken aback that she *had* in fact received the praise she had been seeking, but tried not to let it show.

‘We’re about done here. Just checking with the fire crew and they’ll reopen the road. We’re back tomorrow to deal with the rest of it.’

‘Sure thing.’ She nodded, and gathered up her things as Frank headed towards the fire truck.

Diya stood there on the pavement, alone with her thoughts, which were racing almost too fast for her to get a handle on things. She had promised herself that if there was one more incident, another of those weird half-dreams, she would go and see a doctor. Even if they were just her mind’s way of processing grief it would be reassuring to hear it from a professional. But this … She had heard, clearly and distinctly, a voice that could not have been there. And when she had tried to leave, something had come over her: a sensation of fear that didn’t feel like it actually belonged to her. Auditory hallucinations, disassociation, she certainly knew these terms, but there was something here that she couldn’t quite place. Or, at least, wasn’t ready to accept.

She was desperate to talk to someone about it, but as fond as she was of Xen, Diya didn’t think she’d have much insight beyond ‘go to a doctor’, and she definitely would not be keen to listen to some of Diya’s more *unorthodox* worries about what might be happening. And Mary … Well, Mary would be all too keen to dig into the things that Diya was still reluctant to put a name to, and would fill her head with all sorts of bizarre explanations. No, whatever this was, for now it was her problem to deal with.

‘You coming?’ Xen called from the van, her smile wide and welcoming.

Diya had never felt so alone.

The next morning was difficult. Diya had got into the habit of a relatively early bedtime, and she hadn’t arrived home from Cottage Grove until almost two in the morning. On top of that, Frank had told her they’d be picking her up at seven thirty. She had finally woken up at seven thirty-eight to the sound of banging on the front door. Diya knew it was just Xen,

impatient and keen to get going, but having emerged from some weird, half-remembered dream about being chased, she couldn't shake the feeling that it was something else, something that was desperate to come in and eager to hurt her, and it took her almost a full minute to pull herself from the bed.

The sense of urgency hit her hard then, and her first rushed instinct was to throw on her clothes from the day before, but as she picked up the delicate blouse, she remembered she'd been dressed for an evening with her parents and swore at herself. She actually had to *decide* what to wear and she was still so groggy from waking up that it felt like she had been punched. In the end it was jeans and a T-shirt she'd forgotten the look of as soon as it disappeared underneath a hoodie. Just making those choices left her feeling distinctly overwhelmed. Finally, she stumbled to the front door and opened it.

'OK, OK, I hear you.'

'Jesus, you look awful,' Xen said, her own face an expert canvas of perfect make-up with a spiky blond wig that contrasted with a black mesh vest and black shorts.

'Thanks. And you look … Amazing, actually. What the fuck? Did you even sleep?'

Xen winked. 'Come on, Dad's not going to wait forever.'

'OK, one sec, I gotta use the bathroom.'

'Oh, they'll have one there.'

'At the … collapsed house?' Diya blinked, certain she was missing something.

'No, the cafe. Dad's buying us breakfast, remember? He said so last night.'

'Oh! Yeah, right. Right.'

Diya absolutely did not remember, but it was easily the best idea she'd heard in the four minutes since she stumbled into consciousness.

From the outside, the cafe didn't seem to be different to any other greasy spoon in London. The interior also didn't seem especially distinctive, the menu didn't have anything that marked it as unique and, when the food came, the huge pile of sausages, eggs and hash browns tasted as they had in every other cafe like it that Diya had visited. In fact, it very quickly became apparent that *Alessandro's* was almost exactly like every other diner of its

ilk. But the moment Frank walked in and exchanged grunted nods with the owner, it was clear that it was *his* cafe.

And at that exact moment on that exact day, it was exactly what Diya needed. Chips and beans and grease and instant coffee that, while disgusting on its own, seemed to match the food in front of her like the wine pairing of a Michelin chef. The others seemed similarly engaged with their breakfast, and what stilted conversation there had been disappeared almost immediately, replaced by the sound of knives and forks and satisfied chewing. After a few minutes Diya almost felt human again; whatever dreams might have come had vanished into a mundane morning, and after a few minutes more the feeling was strong enough to remember she still hadn't visited the bathroom, so she excused herself.

'Over there.' Frank gestured to a small door next to the counter.

The owner raised an eyebrow as Diya approached, as though to say the bathroom was not for customers, but he didn't actually say it (and she was pretty sure he legally couldn't) so she ignored him and headed inside.

It was a small room, clearly built to fill a space between other rooms. The sink almost brushed up against her arm when she sat on the toilet, and the bare bulb hung down so low it dangled behind her as she looked in the mirror. But it was clean and functional, and that was all Diya needed. Well, clean except for the damp, slightly mangy looking hand towel kept by the sink. She contemplated it, before drying her hands on her jeans.

Her reflection could have been worse, though Diya kicked herself for forgetting to grab a make-up bag. She knew it didn't really matter; she was going to be spending the day in a mask and safety goggles, but a little bit of concealer would have gone a long way to making her feel a bit more composed. She smiled slightly at the thought of trying to borrow some from Xen or Mary. The Sloughs were pretty close to '01 – Cool Ivory' on the scale of concealer shades.

There was someone behind her. She could see him in the mirror. So close in the tiny bathroom that his face disappeared above the mirror's edge. She couldn't even make out what he was wearing, she simply saw that he was there, pointing towards the ceiling, the ceiling that was bending, buckling, coming down on her in a rain of tile and concrete.

She whipped around to look behind her. Nothing. She looked up to see the ceiling still in its place. She stared at herself in the mirror for a long

time, before shaking her head firmly and heading back out into the cafe. It was too early in the day for this shit.

The street was quiet when they arrived. After the murmured excitement of the previous night, it seemed as though all the life had drained out of the place. The dull grey sky seemed to match the flats that stretched out around Cottage Grove and Diya groaned to herself. She was awake, she was alert, but she really wanted to be anywhere that wasn't here. Still, the road was open and they were able to park directly across from the damaged building.

She and Xen unloaded as Frank spoke to the firefighter from the previous night, who looked like she had been waiting around solely to update them on the situation. There was no danger of further collapse, but given the scope of the damage it had been decided to fully demolish both flats, especially as neither flat was occupied anymore. An expression of discomfort crossed the firefighter's face as she emphasised the *anymore*, and Diya pushed away the memory of the voice she had heard inside.

'Right, what're we doing here?' Frank asked, nonplussed.

'We need it confirmed there aren't any more human remains in there before construction crews can come in. Take a couple of days, give it a proper inspection, dispose of anything you find.'

'Most of that would be in the living room. Under stuff we don't have the equipment to move.'

'Yeah, I said the same thing,' the firefighter said.

'And what did they say?'

'"Just do your best."' She shrugged, turned around and left.

Frank sighed.

'You heard her,' he called back to Diya and the others, who had been pretending not to listen. 'Let's get to work.'

The first task was getting the door cleared enough that they could easily get in and out, something that quickly saw them removing the stuffy coveralls that they had only just put on. In fact, it soon became clear that the majority of their job was going to be clearing and carrying, rather than cleaning. It wasn't exactly what Diya would have chosen for her morning, but the reprieve from the harsh stench of bleach was a welcome one.

Diya watched as Mary examined the wreckage, figuring out where to make a start. She moved slowly and deliberately, and the memory of how

she had handled the locket bubbled up in Diya's mind. Maybe it *was* worth talking to Mary, at least a bit. The incident in the cafe bathroom had shaken her more than she wanted to admit. It was the first time something like this had happened outside of a clean-up job, and she probably couldn't get a doctor's appointment for another week or two. Anyway, what was the harm in mentioning it?

'So, uh …' Starting the conversation was still awkward, though. 'I was wondering …'

'Yes?' Mary was noncommittal.

'What do you, y'know … *sense* from this place? About the man who lived here.'

Mary put down a chunk of drywall and gave Diya a long look, trying to discern any hidden mockery that might be waiting for her. She was quiet for a moment.

'Fear,' she said at last, her voice a little bit uncertain. 'Whoever lived here, his life was ruled by fear. Paralysing, all-encompassing. He longed to be free of it, but it wouldn't let go.'

'He had agoraphobia,' Xen said, coming over. Mary groaned, clearly having hoped the conversation wouldn't be overheard.

'How would you know anything about it?' Mary snapped.

Xen closed her eyes and swayed.

'I … I can *feel* something. Panic. Terror. The walls are closing in on me!'

For a second Diya froze, the sensations she had felt at the threshold the night before gripped her heart again.

Xen gave an infuriating smile, not noticing. 'Or maybe I got chatting with some of the neighbours last night. Apparently the guy basically never left the house, and when he did he was a walking panic attack. One of the folks across the road used to deliver groceries for him, always at night so he could actually bring himself to open the door. Sad, but nothing to do with ghosts and ghoulies.'

Mary didn't respond and simply returned to pulling out a section of warped door-frame.

'Why do you do that?' Diya kept her voice low as she spoke to Xen.

'What?'

‘You know what. The way you talk to Mary about this stuff, it’s … I mean, it’s quite cruel.’

‘Well, she shouldn’t try to bring you into her shit.’ Xen bristled. ‘You’re new to this and you don’t need her filling your brain with that garbage.’

‘Don’t use me as an excuse. It’s not my first day anymore, I’m part of the team. Anyway, I asked her. This isn’t about me and you know it.’

Xen made a sound that was somewhere between irritation and reluctance, then shuffled off to the van and lit a cigarette. Diya followed. It took a few puffs before her friend finally spoke again.

‘No, you’re right. It’s not about you. It’s about George.’ Xen stopped, took another drag.

‘Your brother, right?’ Diya prompted. ‘No-one really seems to like talking about him.’

‘I guess we don’t.’ Xen exhaled a cloud of smoke. ‘He died a few months before we met you. He was … It really hit Dad hard, y’know? I mean, it hit us all. He was just gone. But him and Mary, I dunno, they always used to talk about this kind of shit. I thought it was crap, but it didn’t bother me. Didn’t really pay much attention, to be honest. Now he’s gone, it’s like she’s doubled-down on it, playing it up and just being …’

Xen waved her hand and scoffed, evidently uncertain how to finish the sentence.

‘It reminds you of him?’

‘Kinda? Not really. I dunno, it just gets under my skin.’ Another pause. ‘Guess I could afford to be a bit less of a bitch about it.’

Diya smiled gently.

‘Come on, let’s get back to work.’ Xen smiled back.

When she turned around, the ruined building loomed up once again in front of Diya, and her chest felt tight.

‘You OK?’

‘I don’t know.’ Diya shook her head. ‘It just … it’s really sad, you know? Just thinking about being trapped here, forgotten by everybody, then your own home kills you and they just decide to knock it down.’

There was silence for a moment.

‘Yeah,’ Xen said at last. ‘It fucking sucks.’

While her conversation with Xen had certainly helped to clear the air, it had only strengthened Diya's conviction that she couldn't talk to her about what had been happening, and that bringing Mary into it would be … complicated. Almost partisan, somehow. For now, at least, she was on her own. There had been two weird instances so far in this job, though (three if she counted the voice and the panic as two separate things, but Diya wasn't certain she did), so while cleaning the place up it was worth learning as much as she could about the man who had died here. Maybe she could figure out if there was anything specific triggering her. As she made that decision, she felt curiosity uncoil inside her, eager to seize the excuse and do a little digging. So to speak.

She started with the bathroom in the back, discovering nothing except that he had liked the kind of toothpaste with stripes and he had, in the past, had a prescription for sertraline. The kitchen told the story of someone who had at one point done quite a lot of cooking, based on the number of pans in the drawers and small kitchen gadgets that littered the countertops. Now all of them were covered in a thick layer of that greasy dust that accumulates in kitchens, and the fridge was stocked with microwave meals that hadn't started to smell yet, despite the power now definitely being turned off. With a jolt Diya realised it hadn't even been twelve hours since the man had died. It felt so much longer. She closed the fridge. The door was blank, save for a single fridge magnet for Naples, which had been there so long the back of it was almost fused to the metal. The photo of the city was now faded to an impressionistic outline of the place, like an overexposed polaroid. No, she wasn't going to find anything in here. As if she even knew what she was looking for.

She made her way up to the bedroom, moving carefully on the stairs. They had been assured that there was no danger of them collapsing, but Diya still paused at every creak, waiting to see if the firm footing below her would abruptly disappear, leaving her gripped by merciless gravity. But they remained intact, and she found herself on the small second floor of the flat. It looked like there had been two bedrooms, one of which had fallen into the living room and the other of which was still standing. Looking through the now-empty door frame to where the bedroom once stood she could see the mess on the floor below, and straight upwards through the other two floors of the building to clear blue sky. Initially, Diya had

assumed it had solely been an internal collapse, but it was as though a massive hand had reached in through the roof and punched down through every level to the living room below. That small patch of open air made her feel strange, conjuring up the smallest hint of the anxiety she had felt when trying to leave the night before. She headed into the other bedroom.

At first glance, it was hard not to feel disheartened. The place was so neat that it seemed clear this was an unused spare bedroom. No personal objects adorned the surfaces, the bed was neatly made and the art that decorated the walls seemed almost as faded as the fridge magnet. It was only when Diya took a peek into one of the white IKEA chests of drawers to find neatly folded T-shirts and rows of identical socks that she realised this might just be how the man who had lived here preferred to exist. Had she been told his name? It felt like she had, but once again it seemed to have vanished from her mind. She tapped herself once on the forehead in frustration, as though the impact might jog it free, but still there was nothing.

Checking the rest of the furniture confirmed that the bedroom had been in use. The wardrobe was filled with comfortable clothes in muted colours, worn from long use but not ragged. This told Diya nothing about who the man was, except that his dress sense leaned on the unadventurous side. There was a well-thumbed copy of an old Asimov paperback in the nightstand, a phone charger and … Jackpot! A glasses case with the name ‘Josh’ scrawled on it in Tipp-Ex.

‘Josh,’ Diya said out loud, trying to fix it in her head. ‘Josh.’

The bed creaked ominously as she sat on the end, and Diya had to shift her weight a few times before she felt entirely safe. She hadn’t just been looking for his name, though, had she? What was she really after here? Something to explain why this place might be getting to her? Something that ‘Josh’ might have in common with the hoarding old lady or the homeless man outside The White Lion? Whatever it was that was making her brain fire in a weird way.

What if it’s not coming from inside you? The thought was insidious, but Diya wasn’t yet ready to entertain it. At that moment her eyes caught something in the gap beneath the chest of drawers. Just next to the wall, behind the long wooden legs, lay a small rectangular shape that might just be a mobile phone.

She moved over and reached underneath. Stretching, she could only just brush the plastic phone casing with her fingertips. She leaned in further, pushing her head and shoulders beneath the drawers, but still it was just out of her reach. She crawled towards it, stretching her arm, almost reaching it. Almost. Her fingers closed around the case.

The phone started to ring.

She yanked her hand back like she had been stung. Every instinct inside her told her it was somehow a trap. Which was absurd. Obviously, that was absurd. But still Diya couldn't bring herself to answer. After a few moments, the ringing stopped and the phone was once again dark.

The room was silent. Downstairs she could hear the others shifting bricks and rubble. There was nothing to be afraid of. Steadying her breathing, Diya reached for it again, only to recoil as, once again, the screen lit up and the phone vibrated with an incoming call. It wasn't a specific melody or tune, just a generic ringing sound, slightly distorted or digitally altered in a way that felt like it was going to give her a headache. Again, her instincts screamed at her that it was bait, that she was being lured into something she would not be able to escape, but she pushed the thought away. Whoever it was, they deserved to know what happened to the man who lived here. Maybe he hadn't been as alone as it had seemed.

Lunging forward once more, Diya grasped the cold plastic of the handset just as it abruptly went silent again. At that moment, all at once, she became aware of the heavy chest of drawers directly above her, the weight that could descend on her head in an instant, and the darkness and silence and crushing sense of dying alone flashed through her mind. Then she was out and scrambling back to the relative safety of the bed, trying to shake off the burst of terror.

She examined the device in her hand. The phone was dead, and looked like it had been for a while.

It was definitely time to see a doctor. The thought hit her with a surprising amount of force. She had been planning to do it already, of course, but the weird thoughts and feelings and dreams were one thing, even a sinister disembodied voice. Hearing and seeing a phone ring when it could not have been ringing? That was so much more mundane that it actually made her legitimately afraid. She had assumed the causes were emotional or medical, but it was only now she began to realise just how

serious a medical explanation might be. Being overwhelmed by grief was one thing, but having an actual problem with how her brain perceived the world scared Diya very deeply.

‘Fingers crossed for ghosts,’ she muttered to no-one in particular.

That was a scenario to be considered after she’d actually had some tests. Diya shook her head and stood up, a little faster than she intended. She’d arrange a doctor’s appointment and get it looked into, and until then try not to assume anything about it.

Regardless, her first course of action was to get this phone, a battered old Moto G, charged up and see if it actually still worked. She retrieved the charging cable she’d spotted in one of the bedside drawers and instinctively scanned around for a plug socket, before remembering the electricity situation. She sighed, pocketed the phone, and headed back downstairs.

The rest of the day passed relatively uneventfully. By the end they’d checked and emptied all the surrounding rooms, confirming them as OK for construction (or, more accurately, destruction) to begin. By then the light was failing and Frank decided that they’d hold off until the next and hopefully final day of the job to tackle the living room. Diya was exhausted and desperate to simply fall into her bed and sleep, but the weight of the mobile phone in her pocket seemed to press down on her, sitting there like a heavy chain as the van rattled through the South London streets. She knew that taking it wasn’t allowed and she should probably have handed it over to Frank. But it wasn’t as if the dour patriarch of the Slough family would have known where to send it either, or made any real effort to find out. In cases like this, where they hadn’t been put in touch with any family or loved ones, he just boxed it all up and, according to Xen, passed it on to the appropriate clueless authority figure to be placed in a dusty storeroom somewhere. If it was with Diya, at least she might be able to find someone to return it to, if the dead man had any family or connections. She was just trying to do some good. If it just so happened to also satisfy that inquisitive urge nagging the back of her brain, then all the better.

‘Pub?’ Xen suggested as the van pulled up next to Diya’s home.

She didn’t respond to the suggestion, simply turning her expressionless gaze on her co-worker and letting her bloodshot eyes answer for her.

‘Another rain check, gotcha.’ Xen grinned back. ‘I’ll get you one of these days, and that’s a promise.’

Diya closed the van door and turned away, taking the short flight of stairs up to her front door with a ponderous slowness that spoke of a bone-deep fatigue. Even the key felt heavier than normal as she turned it in the lock and stepped into the dingy, welcoming entrance hall that smelled of her alone. She paused for a second, a deep sadness passing over her for a second as she realised how used she was to the absence of Angie’s smell. How long would it be until she only missed missing it, then didn’t think of it at all? It should be a good thing, to no longer be hit by a wave of grief every time she came in the front door, but at that moment it seemed like an insurmountable loss.

She threw her coat onto a hook, stumbled through into the living room and all but collapsed onto the sofa, throwing her head back in an exaggerated recline. Her eye lingered on the ceiling for a moment, and she turned away quickly at the memory of the living room in Cottage Grove. It was fine, she assured herself, trying not to look up again. She’d gone thirty-odd years before encountering a residential ceiling collapse. What were the chances that she’d be involved with two in the same week?

Remembering the stranger’s phone that still sat in her pocket, she reached over and rooted through the charging cables plugged into the extension lead near the sofa. After a moment’s irritated confusion between micro-USB B and micro-USB C, she slotted the lead into the charging port and stared at the screen in hope. Sure enough, a second or two later appeared the outline of a battery symbol in the centre of the dark glass, with a small lightning bolt to indicate that it was charging. Diya relaxed. Now it was just a matter of waiting. She turned on the television and flicked through channels, eventually settling on an old *Time Team* rerun. They were looking for evidence of an old Roman fort under some history teacher’s back garden, and she was solidly asleep before the first ad break.

8

Hazards

Diya shot awake, taking in a big lungful of air. Had she been dreaming? She looked around in a daze. Still her flat, although it was now fully dark outside, and the only light in the room spilled out from the television, where *Time Team* was long gone and two police officers were now discussing some fictional crime with serious expressions. How long had she been asleep? She switched on the nearby standing lamp and the room was bathed in a warm yellow light. Everything was OK, she told herself, as she rubbed her aching neck. She'd just had an accidental nap, that was all.

From the corner of her eye, Diya spotted the phone plugged into the charging cable. In the middle of the screen, the small battery icon had turned green, and just below it read '100%'. She pulled out the connector and held down the power button, watching as the whole screen lit up with a start-up animation. It was only at that moment that it hit her how ghoulish it was to be waiting for a dead man's phone to come to life so she could snoop through his private information. For a moment Diya almost hoped to be confronted with a lock screen or a passcode she didn't know, anything to stop her going any further down this morbid path. But instead there was simply a collection of application icons over the background wallpaper of a verdant jungle canopy.

She took a moment to consider, then she clicked on the call log. She scrolled through the short list of numbers, mostly local landlines, none of which were listed with any name or label that might indicate their relationship with the owner of the phone. The few emails still stored seemed to be either confirmations or receipts from online or delivery services, with a handful of unpleasant-looking messages from the

Department of Work and Pensions. It didn't look as though he used the calendar function, and the only text messages from within the last year were about groceries from a number listed as 'John (Neighbour)'.

It really did seem as though this man had nobody in his life. Diya had been sincere in her intention to try and contact someone who might have been close to him, but the more she looked, the more it seemed like the only person who genuinely cared that he was gone was … her. No social media, no online bookmarks, it didn't look like he actually used the phone all that much at all. It was with a sense of resignation that Diya clicked on the small symbol that indicated the camera roll.

The first picture came up and she felt cold all over. It was taken through a window, the one Diya only knew as being shattered and crushed at the front of the living room. It was daylight outside, but the street was empty save for the figure of a man standing on the street, smiling towards the camera. No part of him seemed in any way remarkable: he was neither too tall nor too short, he didn't seem especially thin, and he wore a thick winter coat in a dull grey colour despite the apparent sunshine in the picture. His head was topped with brown hair in a neat side parting, and his hands were in his pockets. Diya had seen him before, of that much she was certain, but there was nothing for her mind to hold onto, no distinguishing feature to compare to her own memories. It felt as if as soon as she turned away from the picture she would forget what he looked like.

But she didn't turn away, and it came to her. She'd seen him twice. He'd been outside the house on Crayford Road – he'd talked to her. And then at that park near The White Lion, he'd been standing there, reading a newspaper. Had he been watching her? Who was this man?

She scrolled on to the next picture, then the next, then the next. Each was the same view, another day, another time, the same figure – dressed slightly differently, but always the same man with the same smile, staring through the window.

He killed them.

The thought came unbidden into Diya's mind. She shook it off, trying to focus on the photographs. With each new picture, each new day, the man moved ever so slightly. The smile got closer and closer, inch by inch, photo by photo.

He killed them.

Diya felt strange; she wanted desperately to stop scrolling but her thumb kept moving anyway.

He killed them.

Then he was outside the window. The only way he could be closer was if he was inside the flat. She swiped the screen, moving onto the final photo, breath caught in her throat …

There was a small, electric *pop* and the screen went black. Diya swore quietly to herself and pressed the power button again. There was no response. She plugged it back in, but it seemed to have been thoroughly and abruptly bricked. She sat there, shaking slightly, but she was just too tired to try and make any sense of what she had just seen. She exhaled, trying to calm herself and dispel the sensation of being watched. It was deep into the evening, and Diya decided it was probably time to try and get some proper sleep. There was more work to be done tomorrow.

When the final day at Cottage Grove rolled around, Diya was certainly glad she had rested up properly. Compared to sweeping up outside and clearing out the rest of the buildings, trying to deal with the collapsed living room was both more time consuming and physically laborious. While Frank emphasised several times that they were not expected to fully clear out the wreckage, only check it as thoroughly as possible for human remains, the former was kind of required in order to properly do the latter. Much of the morning was spent breaking apart the larger chunks of debris with a hammer, crowbar and once or twice a cordless reciprocating saw from the van. They could then check them over and throw them on the rapidly growing pile outside. It was a gruelling task, made even more onerous by the need to wear their full cleaning suits at all times in case of contamination, and after only an hour or two Diya found herself flagging. It was hard to tell how the others were handling it under their goggles and masks, but given Xen had barely made a sardonic comment or off-colour joke all day, it seemed likely she and Mary were suffering as much as Diya was.

Even beyond the physical toll of the work, the pictures on the dead man’s phone had really shaken her. She really wanted to talk to someone about it. Angie would have understood. Well, Angie would have made fun

of her, but she would also have treated it as deadly serious. But Angie was gone.

How long had they been going at this now? It must be almost time for lunch, but checking her watch showed that it wasn't even eleven yet. Diya groaned and considered asking if Xen wanted to have a cigarette, as it would give them both an excuse for a break. As she focused back on the chaos around her, she spotted something a few feet from her foot. She leaned down to get a closer look at the small spot of bright-red blood. It was almost perfectly round, and still liquid – a fact that didn't make any sense given that it couldn't be less than two days old. But it looked so much as though it had just dripped down onto the floor that Diya found herself instinctively looking up to see if there was anywhere it could have come from.

She shifted closer, before realising that it couldn't be real. Her mind wandered, her imagination conjuring images that felt familiar. It was clear what was about to happen, but she had absolutely no way to stop it. Without warning she felt the weakened wooden floor splinter and fall away below her, and she dropped deep into the hollow, sucking pit that she had always known waited under her home.

Landing with a crunch on a rough earthen floor, she instinctively sheltered herself from the rain of material she was certain was about to entomb her, but there was only a light smattering of what felt like soil, and then silence. She opened her eyes. At least, she thought she did, but the quality of the darkness didn't change. If there was a hole above, it didn't allow any light to reach her. This far beneath the home that had consumed her there was no light to be found at all.

She reached out, pressing her hands against the walls of cold soil and trying to determine the dimensions of her new prison. She couldn't stand, couldn't even crouch with a ceiling only two feet above her. The walls were just as close on either side, but in front and behind her the space appeared to stretch out. She was in some kind of tunnel.

She screamed, then; shouting and crying and screaming, frantic for someone, anyone, to hear her. She had done so before, of course, when the flat was really getting to her. Desperate for someone to check on her, she had cried at the top of her lungs for hours on end. No-one had ever come,

not even a police car investigating a noise complaint. What possibility was there that anybody would hear her all the way down here?

Thoughts of the flat returned to her again. She should have left it years ago. She had wanted to, so desperately. But the place had consumed her so completely she couldn't abide the thought of crossing that threshold, of being out there in the world of noise and lights and people pressing around her, watching and shouting and pushing and pulling. Even now, so far below the place that had entombed her for almost a decade before it had finally swallowed her completely, even here it made her blood run cold to think of it.

What could she have done differently? Could she have escaped? Within herself she knew the flat was not to blame. It was simply brick and plaster, only hers by an accident of fate. Nor could she fully find the will to blame herself. She had not chosen the sickness that trapped her there, and had she the means she would have released herself from it. Perhaps the man who watched and smiled, who waited outside her window every day. Perhaps he was to blame. It was only after he came that the flat had seemed to turn, to gradually shift from an involuntary refuge to a watching prison. One that had finally claimed her completely.

She shook away the tears. They wouldn't help her in the dark. Stretching one arm out in front of her, she began to crawl, to pull herself through the tunnel that had revealed itself in the earth below. There was no way to tell time down here, no way to sense direction, but onward she pushed, through tunnels that narrowed and widened and occasionally stopped completely, forcing her to feel for other passages and gaps, squeezing through tiny gaps as a breathless laugh reverberated through the soil around her. Her arms felt ragged and bloody, scraped raw by her clawing progress. Occasionally she tried another scream, just to hear something that wasn't her own laboured breath.

Then there was light. Not much, just a hint, but enough to make her eyes burn and blink furiously. She tried to see where it was coming from, but there seemed no clear source. In the dim glow she could see hollows either side of her, stretching off down the tunnel. She blinked again and saw pale shapes within them, some round and bulbous, others long and thin, and it took her a few moments to realise she was looking at bones, old and forgotten, the catacombs disappearing into the darkness before her. The air

felt thin and tinged with rot, but she craned her head forward, trying to get a look at the nearest skeletal body. Just below it, a small metal plaque had been placed, but as she tried to read the name of the one interred, she realised that it had been crossed out, scratched away with such force that the gouges went far deeper than the original inscription. It was impossible to read. Their name was gone forever.

So that was it then. She let herself sag, collapsing to the floor of the tunnel as the will to push forward left her. She turned, rolling on her back and staring at the packed dirt about her as she heard it begin to crack. She braced herself, waiting for the end. And it obliged, as the ceiling gave way and she watched the four stone walls of a sarcophagus descend all around her, its yawning black maw consuming her completely.

‘Oh, shit,’ Xen said. ‘There it is!’

Diya blinked. Her imagination was her own again, the images fading quickly. But it had been different this time. She had actually *felt* it. Whatever this was, it was getting stronger. On the phone to the doctors that morning, trying to book an appointment, she had panicked when they asked her what the issue was she wanted to discuss, and said ‘weird headaches’. This was a long way from a weird headache.

Xen made a noise that Diya couldn’t quite identify, and she looked up to see her friend holding a chunk of wooden board, below which was a large patch of half-dried blood. Xen was saying something else, but Diya was struggling to pay attention, her gaze locked on the sticky patch of floor where a man had been so suddenly ejected from the world. It was lumpy, with red chunks that could as easily be fragments of plaster or fragments of bone. She saw Mary nod and head outside, no doubt to grab some stuff from the van.

Diya turned to follow. As she did, however, she saw Xen grab something and move it out of the way: the thick black cable she’d seen the day before. Frank noticed it as well and she watched as his whole body went rigid.

‘Shit! Live cable!’

Xen froze. She looked at the thick rubber casing in her hands, then at Frank.

‘Just drop it and step away.’ His voice was level, but sharp.

‘Didn’t they shut off the power?’ Xen said, very much not remaining as calm as her father. ‘They must have shut off the power.’

‘They didn’t say either way, but they did tell me they didn’t think there was any wiring in the part of the flat that collapsed. We have to assume it’s live.’

‘Right. Right. OK.’

Diya leaned against the wall, unable to tear her eyes away or breathe as Xen looked to her dad.

‘Just put it down slowly. It’ll be all right, just be careful of the end.’

There was absolute silence as Xen very gingerly placed the broken end down on a section of drywall and stepped away slowly. She exhaled and the tension seemed to ease.

‘I’m sorry,’ Diya said. ‘I should have said.’

Frank turned on her, eyes flashing beneath his goggles.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I saw it when we first came, when I was moving the plank. I should have mentioned, but I forgot.’

‘You *forgot*?’ he said, a deep and genuine anger in his voice. ‘You saw a live electrical cable in a situation like this and you forgot to tell us?’

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t think—’

‘No,’ he snapped. ‘You didn’t think, did you? Someone could have been killed!’

‘Leave her alone!’ Xen stepped forward. ‘I’m fine.’

‘That’s not the point. She put everyone in danger.’

‘I’m sorry, I—’ Diya started, but neither of them were listening to her.

‘Cut her some slack, she’s new.’

‘She’s been doing the job three months. She should have learned *something* by now!’

‘Oh, of course!’ Xen was yelling now. ‘Three months! So she’s got no excuse not to be perfect, has she?’

‘She doesn’t have to be perfect.’ Frank’s voice was still quiet, but burned with fury.

‘No, she just has to replace perfection, doesn’t she? God forbid any of us don’t live up to your precious saint George.’

‘You keep his name out of your fucking mouth!’

The rebuke came so hard and so fast it was as if all the air had vanished. Only silence remained. Diya felt a small hand on her forearm and winced in

pain. It was Mary, gesturing for her to come out into the street. Diya quietly obliged.

‘I’m sorry you had to see that,’ Mary said quietly.

‘No, it’s my fault, I—’

‘Please don’t think that.’ Mary shook her head. ‘They get into it like this all the time. It’s honestly not about you.’

‘OK.’ Diya wasn’t sure what to say to that. ‘Is there anything I can do?’

‘Just give them some space. They’ll get through it soon enough. Until the next time.’

Mary moved back to the van, and Diya stood there, gathering herself, when a sudden thought occurred. Why had it hurt when Mary touched her? She unzipped the top of her Tyvek suit and examined her forearms. There, just below her right elbow, was a mark as though it had been scraped. Like she had been clawing through hard-packed dirt. Diya stared at it for a long time, trying to convince herself that she must have accidentally hurt herself when shifting through the wreckage.

When she returned to the site, neither Xen nor Frank were talking. When the work resumed, it did so in silence. The last traces of the man who had been crushed by his home disappeared quickly. The scrape on Diya’s arm throbbed gently, the last reminder that he had ever existed at all.

9

Check-Up

The tap-tap-tap of the doctor's fingers on the keyboard made Diya's fingers twitch uncomfortably in tandem. He was clearly trying not to appear rude, and made sure to turn his face to listen and nod sympathetically as often as he could, but every time part of her description was worthy of noting down (which seemed to be almost all of it), he turned away and focused on the screen. If she tried, Diya was pretty sure she could have read the words he was typing into the 'Notes' section of her patient records, but she felt too worried and self-conscious about what she was trying to explain. She really didn't want to see how the doctor was describing it in his own words.

'And there have been multiple attacks?' he asked, turning back to her and holding his hands together in what was obviously intended to be an attentive posture.

'Yeah. Three major ones over the last few months, a few more minor … incidents. I think. Maybe six or seven total.' Diya didn't like the way the doctor kept calling them 'attacks'. It made her feel like this was something being done to her, a hostile force invading her mind, which was not a possibility she liked to entertain.

'Mmhm …' Tap-tap-tap on the keyboard. 'And you say this first started after your friend's death?'

'Yeah,' she said, seeing the doctor was waiting for more of an answer. 'A few weeks. When I started my new job. And I know grief can play all sorts of tricks on the mind, but—'

'Actually—' The doctor held up his hand gently. 'I was going to say that severe shocks like that can sometimes trigger any number of conditions,

mental or physical. Obviously, there are some very scary possibilities, but I think it's important not to jump to any dramatic conclusions.'

'Like ghosts,' Diya did not say.

'The way you describe them as feeling dream-like, and the awakening sensation at the end, makes me wonder about hypnagogic hallucinations. Do you have any history of narcolepsy?'

Diya shook her head. 'Hypnagogic?' she asked.

'They're essentially just dreams that happen either too early or too late, often occurring before one actually falls asleep. It's not uncommon in people who suffer from narcolepsy or serious sleep disorders.'

'Right.'

What he was saying made sense. And she certainly hadn't been sleeping properly. It should be a relief, a nice simple explanation. So why was Diya so certain the doctor had got it wrong?

'Anyway, it's certainly not something to be ignored. I'll send you over for a blood test and try to get you scheduled in for a brain scan, although that probably won't be for a little while. We can see if those turn anything up and go from there. In the meantime, keep a note if it happens again: exactly when it happens, how long it lasts, as much detail as possible.'

'Right,' Diya said again, nodding.

'When this next happens, try not to fight it. Now this is purely anecdotal, of course, but I've heard from patients in a similar position that most of the distress comes from trying to fight against the attacks, rather than the attacks themselves.'

He paused. 'Although, the images you've described do sound rather upsetting in their own right, so maybe take that advice with a pinch of salt. Regardless, keeping notes is very important. If we can find a common element that triggers it, we may be able to help minimise them in future, or even avoid them entirely. All this is assuming the tests don't show anything alarming, of course.'

The doctor smiled. He seemed to be taking it seriously, hadn't been dismissive or jumped to any conclusions. He'd done none of the things that she'd been afraid of, but deep inside she couldn't shake the sense that this was an utter waste of time.

Her forearm reminded her why, as she absent-mindedly rubbed the half-healed scrape that ran from her wrist to her elbow.

‘That looks nasty,’ the doctor said, pointing where the sleeve of her cardigan had slid back, revealing the reddened marks. ‘What happened?’

Diya considered for a second. His tone had been polite and conversational, and he clearly thought the main consultation part of the appointment was over. If she said she thought the grazes were to do with her visions, that would open up a lot more questions that she simply didn’t feel like she could face right now.

‘I was doing some work on a house,’ she said, trying to sound casual. ‘Caught my arm on a rough bit of concrete.’

It wasn’t a lie, she tried to tell herself. It was almost certainly what had actually happened. Probably while she was having one of those ‘hypnagogic episodes’.

‘Well, make sure you keep those clean and give them time to heal.’

‘Yeah, I’ve been using plenty of antiseptic.’

‘Good, good.’ The doctor took the blood test forms from where they had just finished printing. ‘Anyway, try not to worry. I’ve seen more than one case like yours, and it usually passes with time.’

She thanked the doctor and slipped the forms into her bag, then closed the consulting room door quietly behind her. The room outside was that specific combination of crowded and hushed that she always associated with a GP waiting room. Everyone just trying to be patient, sitting with their vague suspicions and worries about how their body or mind might be betraying them. Anticipation that was not yet fear, but was certainly adjacent to it.

She stepped outside onto the street and the cold autumn air pushed against her, along with the roar of traffic. The street was busy, people flowing past Diya towards the nearest tube station. It was still early, and everyone would be moving into the centre of town, to jobs or shopping or tourist attractions. Later they would be spat back out to the edges, the cycle of a city.

Another gust of wind and Diya pulled her coat closer as she looked around to see if there was anywhere she might get a late breakfast. She was still getting used to being in a financial position where she could simply choose to eat outside of her home whenever she wanted, but it was definitely a rather freeing feeling. She rubbed her forearm again.

Keep notes, the doctor had said. Try to find connections. Well, she had a few connections, but they weren't exactly leaning towards a medical explanation. Lonely deaths, forgotten victims, a man who seemed to be following her … Or was he following the company?

And what even were these other explanations? Diya kept having to stop herself leaping to absurd supernatural conclusions for her 'attacks', as the doctor had called them. Was that it? Was she being attacked, or made the target of something? The ghosts of the people they cleaned up after? That man who seemed to be there … Was he some sort of psychic? Or a ghost himself?

Sure, he was a ghost. That was it. Great work solving the case, Diya, she sneered, trying to make herself *feel* that these ideas were as ridiculous as they sounded. And throughout it all was a certainty that she simply couldn't shake: her last 'attack' had physically harmed her.

It wasn't impossible that there was a normal explanation for it. The idea that she'd scraped her arms against some building material when she was hallucinating was very plausible, or maybe it had manifested psychosomatically. But there'd been no damage to her suit, and her arm hadn't just been scraped, it had been dirty. It had looked just like she had imagined when she saw herself scrabbling through those awful subterranean tunnels. If these attacks could hurt her then there was an urgency to figuring them out. Or quitting Slough & Sons – though that didn't feel like as much of an enticing option as it should. Diya had never been very good with money, and as lucrative as this job was, what with paying for the flat alone she was still having a difficult time trying to get any money actually saved. Everything still felt precarious.

Still, these weren't questions to be considered on an empty stomach. Diya had just about settled on a pub advertising a sweet potato soup of the day, when she felt her phone vibrating. She pulled it out and her stomach dropped slightly at the name 'Frank Slough' displayed across the screen. They hadn't really talked since the big fight between him and Xen, and while Diya had absolutely believed Mary when she said it wasn't something to worry about, she still had to take a moment before she answered.

'Hello?'

'Diya?' Frank's voice sounded exactly as it always did on the phone.

'Yeah, we got a job?'

‘Heading there now. You at home? We can pick you up.’

‘No, I’m out at the moment. Where is it?’

‘South Kensington. Hobury Street. You OK to make your way over?’

‘I’ll see you there.’

‘Great.’ The call ended with a beep.

Diya sighed. It looked like it was going to have to be a sandwich to go. Still, there was a part of her that was rather curious to see what sort of people died in South Kensington.

10

The Hobury Street Job

Unsurprisingly, the answer was rich people. The tall, terraced townhouses of Hobury Street, with their tiny balconies and clean white entryways, were the sort of Georgian buildings that, in London, were either owned by the genuinely wealthy or carved into a dozen micro-flats for those who enjoyed the appearance of genuine wealth. The house in question, where one Mrs Susanna Parish lived, at least until yesterday, had only the one doorbell, next to an imperious wrought-iron knocker. It seemed that all four storeys and the basement had belonged to the recently deceased, and if it hadn't been for the Slough & Son's van already parked on the street outside, Diya would have been concerned she'd got the wrong place.

She approached the small flight of stone steps that led to the entrance. They seemed almost like a drawbridge to keep out her sort of people, and she wondered for a moment how much of a fight it had been to get the owners to let them park the van outside. The front door opened just as she was about to press the bell, and Xen slipped out, a long black cigarette already perched on her lips. She left the door slightly ajar behind her as she looked up.

'Diya!' she called, skipping down the steps to meet her. She wore a frilly black shirt, a silver pendant of an alchemical symbol Diya didn't recognise, and leather trousers that looked much tighter than seemed comfortable for a clean-up job.

'No suit?' Diya asked, realising Xen wasn't even wearing the blue cleaning gloves.

'Oh, no.' She smirked and lit up. 'They're being weird about it. Want us to change in the corridor outside the room so no-one on the street sees us in

full gear.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Appearances, dahhhling!’ Xen said. ‘What would the neighbours think?’

Diya’s feet made almost no sound at all on the plush carpeting, save at one point when an old floorboard creaked beneath her. A small, sharp woman in the hallway had pointed her in this direction, and the scent of bleach led the rest of the way. As she approached, Frank’s voice was answered by another masculine-sounding voice, clipped and impatient.

‘There must be some other way you can do it,’ the new voice said, as Diya rounded the corner to see a short middle-aged man in a tailored navy blue suit, standing with his arms crossed.

Frank stood opposite him, apparently doing his best not to loom over the much smaller man and spreading his hands in a gesture of mollification.

‘I mean, we could take it away later tonight, but it would mean we’d need to come back tomorrow to finish up the rest of the room. There’s places we just can’t reach before we deal with it.’

‘I’m sorry, but carting a stained mattress out of here in broad daylight simply isn’t acceptable,’ the other man said, in a tone that was not used to being contradicted. ‘Can you not simply clean it here?’

‘There’s some stuff we can do with it, but a wom— Your mother died on it. That sorta stain isn’t something you can ever really get rid of.’ Frank sounded legitimately apologetic in a way that Diya found oddly enraging.

‘Well, do what you can before you take it out of here. Or cover it with something so it just looks like we’re changing mattresses.’

‘Why?’ Diya couldn’t quite stop herself from butting in. ‘Your neighbours are going to find out she’s dead eventually.’

‘What our neighbours know or do not know isn’t any concern of yours,’ the man said, not bothering to turn and face her. ‘Just get it done. You came very highly recommended from Marcel Maurand and I’d hate to tell him we were disappointed.’

And with that, he headed back towards the staircase. Diya looked at Frank, who shifted uncomfortably.

‘I can’t believe these people. Talking to you like that!’

‘It’s just the way of things.’ Frank shrugged. ‘You put up with stuff for a pay check, don’t you?’

‘Well, maybe we don’t need to put up with everything.’ Diya found herself talking in a hushed tone, oddly protective of her looming boss. ‘We seem to do all right without assholes like these people.’

‘They’re grieving.’

‘Are they?’ Diya bristled. She was grieving. The Sloughs were grieving. She knew what grief was and there was none of it in that man. ‘Sounds to me like they’re more concerned with appearances than with mourning. Treating us like we’re some dirty secret they need to sneak in and out. Did you say it was their mother? I guess when there’s a multimillion-pound payday involved it takes the sting off things.’

Frank looked at her for a long moment. There was something in his eyes that Diya couldn’t quite identify. An odd sort of sadness. Then he shrugged.

‘Different kinds of folk deal with it in different ways. Still, we’ve taken the job. Might as well see it through.‘

The smell of tobacco heralded Xen’s return.

‘What up, sluts!’ she said with a grin.

‘Don’t call me a slut,’ Frank said, to Xen’s obvious delight.

‘I meant it in the old sense,’ she said breezily. ‘Someone messy or slovenly, a person with poor standards of tidiness.’

‘I know. And as a professional cleaner I don’t like it,’ Frank replied, and neither of them could be certain if he was joking.

Xen certainly hadn’t been lying when she said the job was simple. While there were a few old stains that could conceivably have been biological in origin, the majority of the work was indistinguishable from any other cleaning job, and after the first hour they dispensed with the Tyvek and goggles entirely. Diya kept her mask on, though. By now she had got to a stage where once the various chemical smells built up enough she was more comfortable with the mask on than without it. It didn’t help that the old window barely opened, meaning that ventilation was a very difficult proposition. Clearly the building was at least partially listed, so the owners couldn’t replace the stiff and draughty windows. Diya couldn’t help but consider the irony of owning something so valuable that it wasn’t allowed

to be comfortable, and the sort of people who would choose to buy it anyway.

They worked in silence, and Diya let her mind wander. Once or twice she found herself staring down out of those windows, peering at the quiet street below. What was she looking for? No, not what. Who. She knew exactly who she was looking for. A nondescript man, probably in a grey overcoat, watching them as they worked. There was no sign of him, though, and the cleaning continued.

A couple of times, the poor ventilation in the room reached the point where the fumes built up to quite serious levels and Frank had to call for a break. This clearly agitated the man in the navy blue suit, who had taken to hovering in nearby rooms while they worked, but Frank explained that he could have a work crew hanging around on the street or passed out in the room, and he accepted the former was preferable. Frank did suggest they could take their break in the small garden at the back, but the man visibly paled and told them the street would be fine, as long as they kept a little way back from the house.

Despite everything, these breaks were actually quite pleasant. The day had warmed up a little bit, and the smoke from Frank's pipe and Xen's cigarette disappeared in the gentle breeze. Mary leaned against the front of the van and idly rolled a chunk of lapis lazuli between her fingers.

'You sensing much up there today, Mary?' Xen asked one break, not unkindly.

Mary smiled wryly and shrugged. 'I'm getting a strong sense that we're not welcome,' she said. 'Though I can't be absolutely certain that's anything to do with spirits.'

Each time they stood outside on break, Diya still found her eyes wandering back to the house, watching the occasional procession of mourners who came in dribs and drabs throughout the day. A well-dressed man would approach the house, sometimes with a partner in tow, and ring the doorbell, their posture one of rote condolence.

'We were so sorry to hear about your mother,' they would say, or perhaps 'We heard about Susanna, such a tragedy.'

'Thank you,' the son would say. 'Please come in.'

And when they left, they would descend the steps from the door, maybe give a final shake of the head, as though to acknowledge the senseless loss

of the venerable Mrs Parish, and walk away. And the moment that this walk began, the sadness dropped from them like a discarded wrapper. Their attitude changed to one of satisfaction: a distasteful duty carried out with dignity.

‘I guess that inheritance really helps you through the grief,’ Xen said to her, after one particularly artificial condolence.

Diya didn’t answer, but was reassured that she was not the only one to have noticed it. Could it really be that simple? She wondered if there was any amount of money that would stop her feeling the death of her own mother. But how could she really be sure? It wasn’t as though she was in line to inherit much. A small South London flat to be split between five of them and, if she was lucky, a few grand in savings? She cut off that train of thought. Standing there on the street, trying to contemplate how she’d feel at her mother’s death, made her feel slightly queasy. Diya thought of Angie, of all the stuff she’d ‘inherited’ from her and now couldn’t stand to look at.

Diya stood in the doorway, looking over the room, feeling like it was the first time she’d really taken it all in. The others were still out on break. She had maybe five minutes before they returned.

The room was actually remarkably ugly. The wallpaper was a floral design from the turn of the last century that had clearly been very expensive when it was bought but had faded horribly and didn’t at all match the dark wooden grandeur of the four-poster bed frame, nor the plush dark-blue carpet that had been put in here to match the rest of the house. A huge art deco dressing table dominated the space next to the small window, with a big circular mirror that reflected the room back on itself, causing the perspective to feel strange as Diya looked at herself in the doorway. It felt as if over the last two hundred years tasteful and expensive things had simply arrived in this room, one by one, none of them suiting the others, but nothing was ever removed.

Diya closed the door quietly behind her as she stepped inside. The chemical atmosphere made her think of the end of her first job at Crayford Road, the ozone machines and the initial onset of her ‘attacks’, and how she had assumed it had been triggered by the fumes. Maybe it had been, a little bit.

She ran her fingertips slowly along each piece of furniture, trying to feel … anything. She closed her eyes and tried to see if there were any sensations, any thoughts or memories that didn't feel like her own. She opened her eyes but the face that looked back at her from the mirror was still hers. From the street below, Xen's laughter at some unheard joke floated up and through the open window. Was she really doing this? Deliberately trying to trigger something?

Diya turned to the looming four-poster frame. The mattress was gone, leaving only the uncomfortable wooden slats, but still she climbed awkwardly onto it and stretched out. This was where Susanna Parish had been when she died. Lying just like this. Diya lay there and stared up into the draping folds of gossamer fabric that covered the underside of the bed's carved wooden roof, breathing in deeply.

What was that? A flicker in her heart? A feeling like her own approaching death? No. No, it was nothing, just one of the many normal aches of a body lying on uncomfortable wood. Diya closed her eyes and tried again to stretch out with her mind, opening herself to anything that might be trying to touch her, natural or … otherwise. She strained her ears to listen, but all that came was another of Xen's distant dirty chuckles.

There was no reason to feel disappointed. She wasn't even sure what she was trying to prove. That these visions were chemically induced, maybe? Or that it could happen with any dead person, not just those that died terrified and alone? Surely she was just trying to get more data for the doctor to help with his diagnosis? But something inside her still didn't believe what he had told her. Because, at the end of the day, the visions weren't the only weird things that had happened to her. What about the disappearing writing at the library? Or the fact that she'd forgotten all three of the dead people's names?

None of that was actual physical evidence, she reminded herself. It could still all be in her head.

What about the man, was he real? She tried to shut down this train of thought. If she couldn't trust *anything* she saw or heard then she might as well just give up now.

If the man was real then who was he? And what was his connection with the three other jobs? Three people: a hoarder, an addict and a recluse, all forgotten by society, left vulnerable and forgotten.

Had he killed them? The thought that had first crept into her mind while she was scrolling through those photographs had never really gone away. What if he was targeting people who wouldn't be missed, getting Slough & Sons to clean up the evidence, and she was somehow sensing this? But could he have engineered a roof collapse? Maybe? It wasn't as if Diya knew enough about architecture or building construction to rule it out. And that phone call Frank had got outside The White Lion, what was the name Xen had used? 'Mr Bill'? Was that him?

Diya tried to shake off the thought. Was she seriously considering the possibility that Slough & Sons were working for a serial killer who targeted the marginalised and lonely, and that she was somehow psychically sensing the echoes of what had happened? Like ghosts trying to reach out to her, begging for justice? Or warning her that she too was in danger?

She tried to dismiss the idea, to ridicule herself for even considering it, and realised with a sinking sensation that, deep down, that might be what she actually believed was happening.

'Everything OK?'

Diya didn't even realise how deeply she had lapsed into thought until Mary's voice shattered her concentration and she leapt up out of the bed.

'Oh, uh, hi, Mary,' she stammered. 'I was just, uh …'

Mary's face curved into a knowing smile.

'Don't worry, I understand. Just having a nap, right?'

'… Sure.'

Mary stood there, a motionless, faceless white shape in her cleaning suit and mask. There was an awkwardness that lingered and Diya realised that there was a part of her that might not fully trust the Sloughs anymore. She hadn't completely put her suit back on, and Diya's arms were still bare. Mary's gaze seemed to shift as she spotted the grazes from Cottage Grove.

'Are those …' Mary started to ask a question, but the door opened again and Xen and Frank entered, doing up their coveralls. The moment passed.

'You all right?' Frank said. 'Thought you were going to come get us?'

'Sorry.' Diya mimed patting the phone in her pocket. 'Had to take a phone call.'

'Sure,' Frank said, clearly uninterested in whether or not that was the truth.

‘Come on,’ Xen said. ‘Let’s get this finished. I’m sick of the lady downstairs giving me evil looks every time I go outside for a smoke.’

‘Right you are.’ Frank nodded and handed Diya her gloves.

They were out of the house by three. Diya watched as the others piled into the front of the van.

‘You coming?’ Xen called to her.

After a moment’s hesitation, Diya shook her head, a (technically true) excuse already concocted.

‘We’re not too far from the Science Museum. My nephew’s birthday’s coming up, thought I might get him one of those kits from the gift shop.’

‘Cool, well, stay on target, OK? That place is dangerous. You go in to buy a pencil and the next thing you know you’re spouting nonsense about the world being round.’

Diya let loose a genuine laugh. It felt good.

‘I’ll be careful.’

‘Make sure you are.’ Xen wagged her finger. ‘Because if you come back talking shit about the earth orbiting the Sun, I’ll have you branded a heretic, OK?’

‘In and out, I promise. Wouldn’t want to put my eternal soul at stake.’

‘Oh, and Diya.’ Xen smiled, but there was a hint of genuine hurt in her eyes. ‘You’re running out of rain checks, OK? I’m going to get you to have some fun if it kills me, you hear? So don’t disappear on us.’

‘Sure thing.’ Diya kept smiling to hide the pang of guilt that passed through her, both for brushing Xen off and for the suspicions that, out here in the daylight, seemed so absurd.

The van revved up and Mary turned back to wave, her gaze travelling back down to Diya’s arms. She looked worried as they drove away.

Diya wasn’t even certain why she’d lied to them. Wanting to wander for a while and be by yourself was a perfectly normal thing. But she hadn’t been doing much else these last few months. She had long since turned off the message notifications on her phone, and the long strings of unanswered texts from old friends or family sat there as a testament to how much she had changed since Angie. She saw Greg’s face again in her mind, that uncertain grin as he tried to reconnect with a friend who no longer existed.

Death changed everyone, she tried to reassure herself, as she wandered through the rows of beautiful houses, holding her coat closed because it didn't seem quite cold enough yet to actually button it up. It made sense to want more space to work through her feelings. She never used to have this many feelings.

Still, there was no need to hide it from Xen or Mary, or even Frank. They hadn't even really known her before Angie's death. How would they know the ways it had broken her?

The thought hit her before she realised the impact the word would have. Broken. She let herself breathe for a moment. No. It was only grief. Awful, devastating, but part of everyone's life. She thought of Susanna Parish's son nodding insincerely to the parade of would-be mourners. Well, almost everyone.

11

Home

The night felt somehow expectant. Diya sat curled up in the corner of the sofa, flicking through channels. The glow of the television was the only light in the room. Once, when they were teenagers, Angie had found a recording of ‘the sounds of Jupiter’ – radio waves given off by the planet that someone at NASA had taken and turned into sounds. They were long, drawn-out tones, vibrating and wavering, never quite resolving into anything our brains would recognise as music. She’d put it on for hours and they’d stare at a muted screen as Angie slowly moved through the channels. Talk show hosts silently laughing, TV chefs staring out at you as they sauteed onions, sitcom characters declaiming nothing to no applause, all scored by the echoing tones of a far-off planet.

Angie loved it. She said doing it made her feel like she was dead. A ghost, cut off from the world and able only to stare at it in silent, oppressive detachment. Diya knew exactly what she meant, but it had always been a feeling that she hated. It made her brain feel like it was vibrating too fast and left her feeling faintly nauseous.

Now the volume was turned up high on the television, and she hadn’t listened to the sounds of Jupiter in almost a decade, but as she stared at that screen she felt it again, that old sensation of being severed from the world. Diya hugged her knees to her chest and felt like she was dead. Winston came and sat decisively on her lap, and she stroked him absent-mindedly, the feeling of his soft fur a small but significant comfort.

What about Angie’s ghost? If Diya really believed she was connecting with spirits or channelling the echoes of people’s last moments – which she definitely didn’t – why couldn’t she do it with Angie?

At some point in these wonderings, Diya had stood up from the sofa. Now she found herself in that familiar spot in the door to her friend's bedroom. Nothing had changed. Of course nothing had changed. This place was a tomb now.

She looked over the static shelves, her gaze falling to three dull green notebooks that sat on Angie's old memento shelf. Part diaries, part scrap books, the two of them had spent a few weeks putting them together when they first moved in together. Polaroids, ticket stubs, notes, and in-jokes – memories made physical. All sat behind the small jewellery box that contained her most precious memory of all …

No. Diya couldn't face looking at them. Not yet. To read them would feel too much like accepting Angie was really gone. And what if she wasn't? What if she simply needed to be reached out for? Properly. Maybe Diya did have the power. Maybe …

There was nothing to mark the spot on the carpet where Angie's body had lain. Slough & Sons had done their job well, but Diya didn't need to see anything. She had spent long enough staring at it that slipping into the space felt almost like a reflex. Lying there, her body matched up exactly to the position of her best friend's, she tried desperately to feel something. What she was doing felt so deeply morbid her skin was crawling, but she seized on that repulsion and held it close. Where did it spring from, that place deep within her? She tried to follow it through and out of her, squeezing it until she felt like it must be ringing out like a spectral bell.

Nothing happened. She lay there, waiting for any sort of sign, but still there was simply silence. That sense of the grotesqueness of her action, how macabre she was being, gradually faded, until finally she was simply lying on the floor in the dark. The tears came, of course, but they were brief, and after they were gone she found herself drifting off into sleep.

There was laughter coming from the alley. It was high, breathless, and set her hair on end. Diya hated living next to that alley. For some reason it was always when they reached it that drunk assholes felt they had to be at their most vocal, and if you had your window open you'd be treated to all sorts of colourful nocturnal soundscapes. The laughter came again and Diya found herself shivering.

She pulled herself up and reached for the light switch. Often just the light turning on in the window above them was enough to spook whoever

was hanging around outside.

Click. Nothing. Was the bulb out? It must be, since the rest of the electrics seemed to be working fine. She could just make out by the light of the hall behind her that the bulb wasn't simply not working. It had been removed. Did the cleaners do that? Why? Had there been blood on the bulb? How would that even work?

Again came the laughter. It seemed closer now, and Diya's eyes returned to the window looking down over the alleyway. Did she know that laughter? It was familiar. Awful.

There was something in the window. It was hard to make it out, just a shadow in the glass, or maybe a silhouette of something against the faint glow from the lamp-posts on the main street. Diya got closer, squinting to try and get a better look at the shape, but without the room light it was impossible to see any details. It seemed to occupy the bottom right corner, just below where the window had been cracked open.

Had she left that open?

Diya pulled her phone out of her pocket, pointed it slowly towards the shape on the other side of the glass, and turned on the torch.

The bright light reflected off a shining row of wide, grinning white teeth.

Every muscle in Diya's body seized up as she stared at the smile outside Angie's window, her mind telling her to *run, run away, get away*. But before her legs could unlock, an arm shot through the open window and grabbed her phone. She only saw it for a moment, but Diya would swear that the hand that grabbed it had no fingernails. The fingertips were perfectly smooth, as though it were impossible to tell which way up the hand was supposed to be. It reached towards her, and gently touched her face.

Diya shot awake with a start. What time was it? How long had she been lying here? She shook her head. A dream. Just a dream.

So why had it felt so much like a memory?

Trying to stand up, Diya felt her body protesting, igniting with aches all down the side that had been stretched out on the hard floor. The carpet in Angie's bedroom was certainly not the plush pile of Mrs Susanna Parish, and when she glanced in the mirror, her cheek was dappled and painful where her face had rested on the floor.

When had it got so cold? Diya shivered as she noticed the open window. It had definitely been closed when she lay down. She looked at her phone: 3 a.m.. It felt like all the warmth had been sucked out of the place. She checked her hands, touched her face. Diya still felt like herself, and this time she was certain she was awake. No dream, no vision. She was here.

All of which would have been reassuring – if it were not for the fact of the open window. Diya moved slowly towards it, nerves on edge, the draught that rolled in goose-prickling her skin. She looked over the length of it, trying to see if there was any problem that might have caused it to open of its own accord. But the latch seemed perfectly functional. When Diya pulled it shut, it clicked into place and the breeze stopped instantly. The room was still again, though it felt no warmer than it had a moment ago.

She stared at the window. There didn't seem any obvious way it could have opened itself, but that left only two possibilities. The most likely one was that she had opened it herself. She didn't remember doing so, but she might have been in some sort of fugue state. Given how little she felt she could trust her own mind at the moment, she couldn't discount the possibility. The other option, however, somehow made her feel even colder: that someone else had opened the window …

The thought of those long, featureless pink fingers reaching in through that exact window haunted her, and her mind raced through every dark or shadowy corner of the house, imagining what it would look like with a wide, toothy smile reflecting out at her.

The house suddenly seemed a lot darker than it had felt a moment ago, and Diya's ears strained to pick up any sounds of movement. There was no evidence anyone was in her home, she was just making a wild extrapolation from a single open window.

'Sure thing,' she muttered to nobody. 'Of course, it means a murderer has magically sensed you're onto him and is coming for you. That's a normal thing to think.'

Unless she had always been a target? Was she someone who wouldn't be missed?

'Shut up, Diya,' she told herself. 'You're not helping.'

And yet standing there, the only light in the room the orange glow of the streetlamps in the alleyway below, she did feel terribly alone.

She stepped towards the light switch, telling herself there was no reason to be moving so slowly, nothing was watching or listening for her. Halfway across, something inside her snapped and she half-sprinted, half-leapt the last couple of metres, slamming her hand on the switch. Light filled the room, though not quite as much as she had expected. She stood there, leaning against the wall, trying to convince herself that the light had dispelled her fears.

‘See. Nothing. There’s no-one else here. There’s no-one else here.’

A full ten minutes went by with Diya stood there, listening to her heart beating and trying to decide whether fully searching the house would be a sensible course of action or whether she should simply ignore what she was pretty certain was just paranoia. Or she could run out the front door into the night and get a hotel somewhere.

‘No. This is our fucking home. I’m not scared of you,’ Diya declared to the empty room.

There was a big torch in the boiler cupboard, she was certain of it. Diya marched out of Angie’s room, into the hallway, and threw the small door open, not giving herself time to think about what might be lurking inside. There was no monster inside, no grinning man. Just the boiler, some cleaning supplies (now looking hopelessly inadequate to her better-trained eye), her toolkit and the torch.

Turning on the heavy light immediately boosted Diya’s spirits. Even in the comparatively well-lit corridor, the powerful beam lit the place up and seemed to drive away the dread in a way the dim bulb in the bedroom simply hadn’t.

‘Let’s do this.’

First, Diya checked every corner and crevice of the living room. Even under the sofa and the thin space behind the bookshelf. Nobody could ever have fit in these places, of course, but her mind still couldn’t let go of the image of some grinning figure, squashed and compressed like some sort of putty, squeezed into any place she hadn’t checked herself, silently laughing at her.

The kitchen next, then her bedroom, the bathroom, and the third room that she and Angie had always talked about turning into a little craft room or study, but which had just ended up filled with whatever they couldn’t find a home for elsewhere. Boxes of old fabric and clothes needing repair

sat on top of an old dining table. She'd forgotten how much of the stuff in here had been Angie's and it was only her raw nerves that kept her from dwelling on it.

Her breath caught in her throat. There was a shape coiled, hunched in the corner of the room. She spun around her light to reveal a pile of old clothes, the pale cream colour of a thin jacket giving the momentary impression of sun-starved white skin. This room was so cluttered, and the thought of Crayford Road tried to creep into her head.

'You can worry about becoming a hoarder later.' She gripped the torch tightly. There was one place she still had to check.

Angie's room was as silent as when she left it. The window was still closed, but it didn't seem to have got any warmer. She'd been in this room, obviously there was nobody there. So why did her throat feel so tight when she stood on the threshold? She cast the beam around: the desk, the bed, the chest of drawers, the cupboard.

It hit her immediately. The memory. Years ago, in their old flat, when Angie had first bought the wardrobe from a junk shop, this huge thing of mahogany that had not been well-cared for, she used to hide in it. She would wait in that looming wooden thing until Diya would come in to share a joke or bring her some dinner, and then leap out of the cupboard at her. Angie used to do it a lot in the old place, right up until the time she did it when Diya was carrying a bowl of very hot soup. That had been the last time Angie had jumped out of the wardrobe.

Now, as Diya stood at the edge of the room, the wardrobe seemed bigger than ever. Her light seemed to cast into stark relief every scuff mark, every scratch and uneven patch of varnish. One of the two handles on the front had long since fallen off, and Diya tried to make out what might be inside through the gap it had left, but the small hole was dark. She got closer, her heart in her throat, her eye pressing closer and closer, trying to make out what might be inside. Her hand shook as she reached for the handle.

There was a laugh. It came from the alleyway, the low and guttural laughter of a drunk, but it shattered Diya's nerves and she retreated to the threshold of Angie's room, gripping the doorframe with fingers that ached from the tension. She tried to gather her thoughts. If she opened the wardrobe and it was empty, as it *definitely* was, then she was safe. Her home was safe and secure and all of this worry had been for nothing. The

sooner she did it, the sooner she could sleep soundly in her bed. But if she opened it and it wasn't empty … If some half-seen figure was there, crouched below the forgotten dresses of her dead friend, if it turned to her and smiled …

Diya backed slowly out of the room and closed the door behind her. She went calmly over to the small bowl where she used to drop her keys, but now only Angie's lay there, gathering dust. She found the key to the bedroom and, as quietly as she could, returned to the door, listening for any movement from within. In a single swift motion, Diya put the key in the lock and turned it, sealing the room shut with a click. She left it in the keyhole, and turned away, heading quickly towards the front door, pausing only to grab her bag.

She glanced around, looking to check that Winston was OK. The old cat sat placidly on the counter. He got up, did a big stretch, then hopped down and disappeared out of the cat flap, off on whatever feline business he had in the garden. OK. He was OK. Diya turned and left the house.

Diya was down the street, hotel booked and calling for a minicab before she had even fully realised what she had decided to do. She waited in the pool of illumination below a lamp-post, casting her eyes back towards the entrance to her home. All the windows were lit, and at no point was there any movement, any sound from within it. And yet Diya did not feel foolish or embarrassed by what she had decided to do. In fact, she was absolutely certain she had made the correct choice.

It was almost midday when the buzzing of Diya's phone woke her. She clawed her way to consciousness, although her eyelids seemed desperate to be drawn back together. There was a momentary lurch of panic as she realised she wasn't in her room, but the tastefully bland hotel artwork on the wall brought it all back. First, she remembered where she was. Then, she remembered why. The old clock radio on the nightstand not-so-gently alerted her to how late it was and she allowed herself a momentary glow of pride that she'd thought to book for two nights. She could stay in the room and recover all day if she needed. And she might.

The phone buzzed again, and Diya picked it up to see the name 'Mary S' listed as the caller. Her stomach dropped. Not another job already, surely?

‘Hello?’ She tried to sound like she’d been up for hours and absolutely failed.

‘Hi, Diya? Are you OK?’

‘Uh, yeah?’

‘It’s Mary,’ said Mary.

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘Right, sorry. I just, I came by your flat and there was no answer. I’ve been trying to call …’ There was real concern in her voice.

‘Yeah, I’m fine.’ Diya was struggling not to be snappy. ‘I’m just out, that’s all. Do we have a job?’

‘Oh, no, I—’ Mary sounded slightly awkward. ‘I was just … I wasn’t sure where you were. I was worried.’

‘I do have a life outside of work,’ Diya snapped defensively, then immediately regretted it. It was a lie, anyway.

If it had hurt Mary’s feelings, she didn’t show it.

‘Are you free for lunch? I need to talk to you.’

There was an urgency to the words that made Diya hesitant to refuse.

‘I … Yeah, sure. Mary, what is it?’

A long pause.

‘I know something’s been happening to you. You’ve had … There’s something you really need to know about the family business.’

There was a low mumble of conversation that ran through the coffee shop, punctuated by the occasional clink of teaspoons or a mug being put down slightly more forcefully than intended. They had found a spot at the back of what seemed to Diya like a pretty standard high street Caffè Nero, although Mary had talked about it like it was some unknown gem hiding away in the backstreets. It did have comfier chairs than Diya had expected, and a few pleasantly cosy nooks walled with an almost entirely random selection of hardback books. Still, it didn’t seem particularly special.

Mary returned from the counter, carrying a pair of mugs, a packaged sandwich and a small plate with a glistening brown square. Now that she could see Diya was alive and unharmed, she seemed to have relaxed a bit.

‘Latte, right?’ she asked, not waiting for an answer before putting the cup down in front of Diya, followed by the sandwich.

‘Thanks.’ Diya nodded as she unwrapped her sandwich.

Mary sipped at her black coffee and stared at her small brownie, as though trying to figure it out.

‘You not hungry?’ Diya said, taking a mouthful of dry chicken and salad leaves. She wasn’t sure what to expect. It felt like this was going to be a big conversation, and one that had been a long time coming, but it surprised and slightly unnerved Diya that it was Mary sitting across from her now, and not Xen.

‘Hm? Oh, not really. Just wanted a little treat, you know?’

‘Yeah.’ Diya nodded. ‘Although, I always thought you were into that whole no-sugar, clean-eating thing.’

‘Why, because I’m a bit woo-woo?’ There was a touch of wry amusement in her voice.

‘A bit what?’

‘Oh, you know …’ Mary wiggled her hands and made a whistling sound that was probably meant to sound like a theremin. ‘A bit out there. Ghosts, the supernatural, all that stuff.’

Diya looked into her coffee, slightly embarrassed.

‘I guess … Yeah. I suppose I just assumed you were into all of that stuff: crystals, aliens, astrology, yoga, you know?’

‘Let’s see.’ Mary considered. ‘Yes, no, yes and I find the exercises are good but I don’t like all the faux spirituality they put on it. Just feels kind of gross and appropriative. But I guess I don’t have to tell you that.’

It took a moment for Diya to realise what she meant.

‘Oh, uh, I guess.’ She shrugged, realising how little she and Mary had actually talked in the months they had been working together. ‘My family were actually Muslim. Still are, if you ask my grandmother, though you wouldn’t know from my folks, so …’

‘Ah, right, sorry, I—’

‘It’s fine, don’t worry about it,’ Diya said, trying to breeze past the slightly awkward moment. ‘No aliens, then?’

‘I mean, I think that there’s definitely some form of other life somewhere in the universe. But I don’t think we’ll ever meet it.’

‘Right. And no clean eating.’

‘I’m actually the other school of thought.’ Mary smiled. ‘I think it’s important to listen to what your body is asking for and give it what it needs. And right now mine needs chocolate and sugar.’

She bit into the small brownie, illustrating her point, and took a sip of coffee. Diya couldn't help but smile back, but it quickly disappeared as her companion's face turned serious. There was a pause, as if neither was quite ready to broach the subject at hand.

'So,' Diya ventured, 'you wanted to talk to me about something?'

Mary nodded.

'It's about George.'

The name hung in the air between them.

'Has Xen mentioned him before?' Mary continued. 'Or Dad?'

'I know he was your brother. I know he died and I … I assume I'm his replacement. I guess I thought I'd learn more about him when you were all ready. I mean, I know that losing someone can be …'

She trailed off, and Mary just nodded.

'*Are* you ready?' It felt like a stupid question as soon as it left Diya's lips. What the hell did 'ready' even mean in this situation?

Mary didn't answer.

'So what do I need to know about him that's so urgent?' A much more solid question.

'I'm not psychic.' The words were said quickly, quietly, as though it was an effort to put the sounds together. 'I'm not a medium or … I know that. For a while, after George died, I thought that maybe … He always had a … I was trying to do it too, you know? I was trying to feel things like he used to. But I can't. I think I'm just about ready to accept it.'

Now it was Diya's turn to sit silently, trying to take in her companion's words.

'But I've been … I don't want to say "watching you", that sounds really creepy,' Mary said, and Diya couldn't disagree. 'I've just noticed how you've reacted to stuff, the way you kind of zone out, like he used to, and … Your arms. That didn't happen naturally, did it?'

Diya didn't answer. Another deep breath.

'I think you deserve to know what happened to him.'

12

George

George Slough had always been loud. From the very moment he entered the world, he had made an astounding amount of noise, working his newborn lungs to such an extent that when the midwife handed him to his exhausted parents, she practically ran out of the room, leaving them there with the pink squirming thing that seemed to be trying to scream down the hospital.

As he grew, George's ways of expressing himself became more controlled, but his volume never really decreased. Whether racing around the back garden celebrating getting his little football past his dad and into the goal, or demanding to wear bright and garish clothes that clashed horribly, nothing he did could be described as subtle. Even as young as four, with his thick curls of golden hair and easy smiles, there was a magnetism that drew other children to him. And when his siblings came, one after another, they found in him someone ready to be the perfect older brother.

Of course, according to those same siblings, 'perfect' probably wasn't the right word, but he was certainly everything an older brother was expected to be. He was just enough of a bully to cause childhood friction, but always there to step in and defend them from others at the playground. He was sporty in ways that made his father proud, spending his weekends excelling at kids football and rounders, all rosy cheeks and energy that made his less-athletic siblings a bit self-conscious. Everything they tried, he'd tried already and either been excellent at or discarded, giving them his hand-me-down interests (and in Xen's case, his hand-me-down clothes, which she, unsurprisingly, hated). While their parents did their best to hide the fact, it was always clear that George was the favourite, the golden child of the Slough family.

And, as he grew, he seemed inclined to try to live up to this image that others had of him. He developed into someone who seemed to be out of a 1950s boys' adventure story: hale and hearty and honest to a fault. George Slough was a good person in a way that was both deeply infuriating and apparently genuine. He was the first person that Xen came out to when she was thirteen, and he had embraced and supported her, helping her through the early year or two when their father had struggled to understand. He had a booming, sudden laugh that seemed to explode from nowhere, and there seemed no doubt in anybody's mind that he was going to make his parents proud.

'Dad, why does your van smell like that?'

This was the question, at the age of seven, that started it all.

'Well, George,' Frank Slough replied, 'it's to do with your dad's job.'

'Why? What do you do?'

'I'm a cleaner. Me and your grandpa and your uncle Dave; people hire us to go and clean up after people.'

'What sort of people?'

Frank's eyes darted to his wife Bridget, who was sat knitting in the corner. She gave him a look that told him it was entirely his decision how much to tell their son.

'All sorts of people,' he tried to deflect.

'Why can't they do their own cleaning?'

'Well, son, they're dead. When people die, the people who loved them pay us to come and make sure everything is nice and tidy.'

There was a long pause as George considered this, and Frank really thought he might have successfully navigated his questions, when the boy tugged on one of his curly blonde locks with a very serious expression on his face.

'What if nobody loves them?'

Frank's stomach dropped and the click of Bridget's needles came to a halt. He weighed up the idea of lying, of lying to his son and telling him that everybody in the world has someone who loves them.

'In that case,' he said at last, 'somebody else pays us to clean up. Someone like the council.'

‘The council?’ George asked, and with a sigh of relief the conversation had been successfully moved away from trying to explain the morbid details of Frank’s job and on to trying to make him understand the structures of local government.

It had opened a door in young George’s mind, however, and from then on it was rare that a week passed without further questions and curiosities about his father’s job. It took only a couple of months of badgering before his parents relented and he found himself strapped into the passenger seat of the sputtering old van, driving to go and see a job for himself. His father and grandpa talked earnestly over his head, talking about work and bills and people that George had never heard of. He was so excited that he could barely sit still.

As the van pulled up in front of a tall block of flats, George could see the flashing lights of an ambulance. His father exchanged some quick words with his grandpa. They seemed confused as they opened the doors and hopped out, leaving George in his seat as they hurried over to talk to a man in a hi-vis jacket. The boy stared out of the windscreen, watching the people hurrying around, fascinated by the flurry of activity, Then, without warning, the dull grey skies opened and the rain began to fall. In almost no time at all the glass was a blurry mess of cascading rain and George could see nothing of what was happening.

Unbuckling himself with a click, he pushed open the door of the van and lowered himself slowly down to the ground. He pulled up the hood of his bright green dinosaur anorak and stumbled towards the ambulance. The flashing lights glowed through the rain and George watched them with a smile. The ambulance had always been one of his favourite toy cars to play with (second to the fire engine, of course) and he took any chance he could to see one in real life. As he got closer, some grown-ups approached, pushing a low trolley with what looked like a big rubbish bag on it.

From behind him, George could hear his dad shouting his name, and he turned to see him hurrying over. There was something else he was trying to say, but the rain on George’s hood drowned out the words. Looking back towards the paramedics, it was clear something was going wrong. They were shouting at each other as the wheels of the trolley lost traction and it began to tip over. It seemed to teeter for a long time, then collapsed to the ground, flinging the big black bag across the tarmac and tearing it open.

Lying there on the sodden ground was a man. His head and naked torso lay there, unmoving and impossibly pale. The eyes seemed to gaze out at George as the raindrops dripped over the glassy, unseeing orbs. He stared back, not entirely sure what he was looking at, but worried that it was somehow not allowed, that he was going to get in trouble. Then all at once he was being picked up in his grandpa's strong, wiry arms and taken quickly back to the van, away from the first corpse he had ever seen.

'Sorry, young 'un, that shouldn't have been there. You shouldn't oughta have seen that.'

The door shut again, leaving George sitting there, listening to the rain beating down, with more questions than ever.

It was raining again when George went on his first job with the rest of the family. He was sixteen and itching to get started, to prove himself. He sat there in the back of the new van, trying to contain his eagerness. The vehicle was less than a year old and the white paint job still looked crisp around the name 'Slough & Sons'. He was finally going to be one of the sons, joining a line of workers that, as his grandfather always proudly told him, went back almost a hundred years. Although the inside of the new van was already chipped and stained and speckled with the signs of an active, hard-working space, it seemed almost magical to young George.

The van pulled up outside a run-down looking bungalow, hemmed in on both sides by terraced houses. George pulled open the side door and the rain beat down in a thick sheet just beyond it.

'Hey, Frank,' his grandpa said. 'Suit up and go take stock.'

'Don't you always do the first check?' his dad replied, nonplussed.

'What, you want to send an old fuckin' man out into the rain?' Grandpa Francis said, lighting up a foul-smelling cigarette. 'Get in there!'

There was a chuckle from Uncle Dave as George's dad hopped out of the driver's side door and made his way to the side of the van, awkwardly putting on a bulky yellow suit while trying to stay as protected from the rain as possible.

'You'd best get dressed too,' Grandpa said to him.

'Leave the kid be,' Uncle Dave called back. 'No point him getting dressed up until we know the damage, right? Hey, George, you smoke yet?'

'No, he doesn't,' his dad said curtly from outside the van.

‘He’s a working man, now. It’s his choice.’ Uncle Dave smirked, holding out a pack of Benson & Hedges towards George

George reached out and took one, waiting for his father to tell him no. But the word never came. His hand shook as he tried to light it. Was he nervous? Excited? It wasn’t like this was the first time he’d ever tried a cigarette. But this felt different.

The end caught on the lighter’s flame and George inhaled. It tasted disgusting.

It tasted like adulthood.

The kitchen felt strange to George. An odd combination of the familiar and the alien. The wood finish of the cabinets was very similar to the kitchen they had at home, and the linoleum flooring was a similar shade of cream. But the rest of it couldn’t have been more different: the fridge was a great black monolith with a heavy dent in its lower door, the oven was rusted and crusty with dirt, and a bright red microwave stood on the corner of the counter, gleaming and new, the only thing that looked like it had been touched in the last year or so. But even the parts of the room that seemed reminiscent of his home were worn and grubby, touched by a creeping neglect that was unsettling to see on things he recognised.

Perhaps he was just focusing on this to avoid looking at what dominated the centre of the room: his father, face obscured by mask and safety glasses, crouched over a large patch of dried brown blood. It wasn’t that it scared George to think about, or even that it disgusted him, it just was somehow rude to stare at it. As though thinking too much about the blood of another person was some intimate act, violating the boundaries of a stranger. A dead stranger. Did that make it better or worse?

The room went silent, and it was only at that moment that George realised that his father had been talking to him.

‘Uh, sorry?’ he stammered.

‘You need a moment?’ his father asked. His voice gave nothing away, and George was suddenly unsure if this was a genuine offer or some sort of test.

‘No,’ he said a little too hastily. ‘I’m fine. What were you saying?’

His dad nodded once, and returned to looking down at the stain, saying something about linoleum and blood. George tried to follow it, but he’d

clearly missed the part where he'd actually been told whether it was good or bad that it had happened on the linoleum.

His father's outstretched hand indicated he was waiting to be passed something. He couldn't know his son's mind had wandered, so George turned to the array of bottles and jugs that were lined up next to them, trying to see if he could make any deductions as to which his father wanted. He reached out for a red spray bottle, waiting to hear his father telling him that he'd got the wrong one, but there was no such admonishment. Relieved, George handed it over.

But there was no-one there. The kitchen was quiet and empty. The linoleum flooring was clean, or at least as clean as it ever was, and a gentle breeze blew through a window that opened onto a still and overcast day.

'H-hello?' His voice felt strange in his throat, and for a long moment he was unsure who he was even calling for. He looked around his house, looking for what had changed, what was giving him a feeling of disquiet all of a sudden. But the place was as empty and still as it ever was. Perhaps he was simply missing Muffler. Her bowl was full, but there was no sign of her. It wasn't exactly unusual, of course; she'd never been an indoor cat and would often roam the neighbourhood for most of the day. Still, something was missing.

That was it. He hadn't heard a car in minutes. That was certainly odd. The walls of the bungalow were thin and the road was busy. He went through most of his day accompanied by the near-constant rumble of traffic in the background, so regular that he almost stopped hearing it. Now there was nothing, though, and hadn't been for some time, it seemed. He waited, an uneasy feeling growing inside him, waiting for the noise to return, for anything to break the silence. Eventually he made his way to the front door. He didn't like to go outside, the people out there were always so cruel, they stared at him like he was some sort of grotesque curiosity. Still, maybe they'd had to close the road for some reason and he should check what was going on. He'd hate to die in a gas mains explosion just because he was too nervous to go ask what was happening.

Outside, the street was empty. No cars, no people – but also no signs closing off the road, nothing that would seem to indicate there was any problem. He stood and listened again. Nothing but the wind.

Something was definitely going on, and he wasn't going to rest easy until he figured out what it was, so he turned and walked up towards the intersection that led to the high street. It was four o'clock on a Friday, obviously there would be people on the high street. And yet the closer he got without seeing another soul, the more he found his nerves beginning to fail.

Finally, the high street came into view, as empty and lifeless as the other. He hesitated to cross to it. This was all too bizarre, and more and more he simply wanted to run home to where he felt safe. He couldn't, though. If he turned tail after seeing this, even if there wasn't some immediate danger that had led to the whole area being evacuated, he might never dare to leave the house again. Maybe he should have got a mobile phone after all. He needed to contact someone, somehow.

There was a payphone sitting on the corner of a side road. His heart rate slowed slightly at the sight of the reassuring glass box, wallpapered with lewd postcards. He hadn't thought to bring any cash, but 999 would still work. Hopefully he wouldn't be wasting their time. No, anything that would cause this much of Barking to be entirely abandoned would have to be on the emergency services' radar. He picked up the phone and started to hit the 9, placing the receiver to his ear just as his finger was about to press the last digit.

His finger froze in mid-air as he listened to what came out of the phone. Rather than the dull, droning dial tone, or even the silence that would indicate it was broken, there was the faint, but very distinct sound of laughter. It spilled out of the little speaker, regular as a metronome and utterly mirthless, not pausing for breath or answering him when he yelled into the speaker, demanding to know who was on the other end.

The whole unit shook as he slammed the phone down onto its cradle and pushed back outside. His head was swimming and he looked about wildly for anything that might be a friendly face, or even a hostile one. The door to a nearby bookshop stood open: a large, spacious building that always had a few patrons in, quietly perusing the books. He ran inside, screaming for help at the top of his lungs, but the shelves deadened the sound, absorbing it into the sheer weight of paper and ink.

Something was wrong with the books. He approached the nearest shelves: while the volumes on show were as varied in colour and size as

you might expect, the spines were all blank, with no text at all. He grabbed one, a squat red book without a dust wrapper, and opened it to a page somewhere in the middle.

I AM HUNGRY I AM HUNGRY

The words ran over and over again, on every page. The book fell to the floor from his limp hands as he felt himself begin to lose consciousness, confusion and fear finally overwhelming him. The last thing he saw before he hit the floor was the wide, bright grin on the figure that stood behind him.

‘No, it’s the green one,’ his dad said as George stood there, holding a red spray bottle in his hands. ‘Fine, I’ll get it myself.’

George stood there watching as his father doused the bloodstain on the floor and wiped away the traces of whatever had happened there.

George was nineteen when the van returned from Grandpa Francis’ house. He’d been waiting for it to get back, ever since he’d woken up to find his father gone without a word. Xen and Mary were at school and the house was peaceful except for the low patter of daytime television he’d not been able to bring himself to watch properly.

Should he have followed them? He’d been at the funeral, of course, but to be left out of this felt somehow pointed. But no, they had decided not to include him, and he wasn’t going to go begging. He’d at least wait to hear their reasons before deciding exactly how angry and hurt he would let himself get.

The engine outside stopped, and he heard the familiar sounds of the van door being opened and the two of them getting out. There was none of the usual back-and-forth, no laughter or swearing.

‘You comin’ in?’ He could make out his dad’s voice through the thick wood.

‘Nah,’ came Uncle Dave’s reply. ‘Think I’d best head home. Rather be alone at the moment, y’know?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You OK to talk to George?’

There wasn’t an audible reply, but Uncle Dave let out a small sigh and went back to the van, which rumbled to life and drove away just as the key turned in the front door. His father’s shoulders were slumped, and his face seemed a good five years older than it had been when George had last seen him. He saw his son standing in the hallway, and his lips pressed together in resignation.

‘So talk,’ George said, letting an edge of anger bleed into his voice.

His father stared at him for a moment.

‘You want a cup of tea?’ he asked at last. ‘Actually, fuck it, you want a whisky?’

‘No, I don’t want a whisky. I want to know why you left me behind when you went to clean Grandpa’s place.’

There was no immediate answer. His father moved past him, heading into the kitchen where he took down two glass tumblers and laid them on the counter. He uncorked a bottle of scotch (maybe his good one? George could never tell them apart) and poured a decent measure into the first. He looked at the other glass, then at his son.

‘You sure?’

‘Fine. Whatever, let’s have a drink, then.’ George sullenly took hold of the empty tumbler, which was quickly filled with not quite such a decent measure of scotch.

His father held up the glass like he was about to make a toast, then seemed to think better of it and took a long sip instead. George took a drink of his as well. He hated his dad’s whisky, truth be told. He’d periodically stolen swigs of it throughout his teens to see if he was grown up enough to like it yet, but every time it had just tasted like pennies and charcoal. It burned on the way down, just as he remembered, and he tried not to show his discomfort. George waited for his dad to speak, but the older man just kept slowly sipping his drink, not making eye contact. All his life, George had looked at his father with admiration, and there were times he would have done anything for his approval, but right now he just wanted answers.

‘How was it?’ George said at last.

‘Didn’t take long. Wasn’t much needed doing.’

‘Right.’

‘Still need to deal with a bunch of his stuff, but the actual cleaning—’

‘So that’s why you left me behind, is it? Not much to do? Didn’t think it would keep me occupied?’

‘Wasn’t trying to upset you.’

‘Oh, what, you thought I’d be happier sitting home waiting?’

‘You’re not ready,’ his father’s voice was quiet, like he didn’t want to be heard.

‘The hell is that supposed to mean?’ George exploded. ‘I’ve been doing this for five years and you keep telling me I’m doing a great job, you were proud of me, it was all going to be mine someday. Then when it really matters, suddenly I’m not fucking ready?’

‘Watch your mouth,’ his father’s voice had hardened. ‘This is why you couldn’t come.’

‘What? Because I’m not polite enough?’

‘Because you think it’s about saying goodbye. You want closure, you want to make your peace, give the old man a send-off. That was the funeral. This was about cleaning up after him. Doing that for family … It is *nothing* like doing it for strangers. And you’re not ready for that. You’re not. And if that hurts to hear, that’s tough.’

George stared at his dad. That was maybe the most words he’d ever said to him at once that weren’t instructions about a job.

‘You didn’t even ask me,’ he said, the anger leaking out of him.

‘Because I knew you wouldn’t understand,’ came the reply. ‘And I was right.’

‘Then explain it to me,’ George said.

His father drained the last of his glass.

‘We’ll talk about it when you’re ready.’

‘And who decides that? You?’

‘No.’ There was something in his father’s eyes that ever so slightly unsettled him. ‘Not me.’

There was a long silence as George considered his father’s words. Did he know the real reason George had wanted to come along? Since they’d been working together there had been a half-dozen more flashes, weird visions like he’d had on that first job. He’d never figured out what they were, and they scared him very deeply, but he had wanted so desperately to see if he had one at Grandpa’s house. To have one last connection with the sour old man who had been so present his whole life. George had never told his

father about the visions, never told anyone except Mary, who always seemed so attuned to when he was upset that he could never hide anything from her. He wondered now, though, whether his father had suspicions of his own about it; whether it was the reason he didn't trust him.

'That reminds me, when's Mary getting home?' His father's voice jolted him out of his thoughts. Had he been thinking about her too?

'About an hour, I think. Why?'

His father looked out the kitchen window, down their short, unruly back garden.

'Was thinking it's probably about time she started learning the ropes as well.'

'Are you serious?'

Uncle Dave's voice was muffled through the thin walls of the cheap terraced house, but his anger was clear enough. George stopped scrubbing.

'I am.' His dad's voice was clearer, his deep bass tones piercing the wall with ease. There was a hint of sadness in it, hidden beneath firm resolution. 'This is how it's got to be.'

'Bullshit. It doesn't *have* to be anything. I mean, what, I don't even get a look in?'

George was suddenly aware he was meant to be working upstairs with Mary, far away from this conversation. He still had time to turn and leave. They'd never know he'd been here. He put down the sponge and sat there, trying to keep quiet.

'You know how this works, Dave. Unless you're planning to start pumping out kids any time soon …'

'Don't give me that bloodline shit. That's how it worked so far, yeah, but you know as well as I do it can change.'

'If he wants to change it, sure. But I don't see that happening.'

'So why don't we ask?'

George listened, but there was silence, like his father was considering his words, or maybe looking at something.

'Why are you so eager for this?' his dad said at last. 'You know it isn't a good thing, right? This isn't fun.'

'Right, like you don't get off on having the power here? Don't act like I don't know what our job is, but if it comes to it I'd rather be the one calling

the shots.’

‘If you think I’m calling the shots then no, you don’t know what our job is.’

Heavy footsteps told George his father was walking away and he froze, realising they were coming towards him.

‘Why don’t we ask him, then?’ Uncle Dave said.

The footsteps stopped, and George heard his dad turn back. He took the opportunity and silently hurried out and up the stairs.

‘Are you sure you want to do that?’ was the last thing he heard his father say before he was up the stairs and out of earshot.

He found Mary filling a black bin liner in one of the guest rooms. The bedding was shot through with moth holes and she was trying to figure out if any of it was salvageable. She turned and looked at George, clearly seeing that he was a little bit rattled. She started to say something, when their father’s voice came from below.

‘George!’

His mouth went dry as he went to the top of the stairs, Mary following behind, curiosity glittering in her eyes.

‘Uh, yeah, Dad?’

‘Me and your uncle need to take the van and go grab some equipment. You mind giving us a hand?’

George opened his mouth, a question rising in his throat, but then he stopped, clenched his teeth, and choked it back down again. His father watched, then almost imperceptibly nodded in satisfaction.

‘Sure thing,’ George said at last.

‘What about me?’ Mary asked from just over his shoulder.

‘Oh, uh, yeah.’ His dad seemed momentarily thrown, like he’d completely forgotten she was there. ‘If you wait here and keep on with what you’re doing. We shouldn’t be too long.’

Mary made an irritated sound, but didn’t argue, leaving George alone at the top of the stairs.

‘Come on, then.’

‘Sure thing, Dad,’ he said again, though he couldn’t help feeling a weird dread building inside him. The sort he usually only got during his visions.

The day outside was sunny and warm. A lovely early summer’s day that hadn’t yet hit the sweat-slicked heat that the weatherman said was coming.

George’s father and uncle didn’t say anything as they climbed into the van, and rather than sit up front with them, as he had ever since Grandpa Francis died, he pulled open the side door and climbed into the back. He felt safer back there, though he couldn’t have told you why.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked hesitantly as the van pulled out.

‘Picking up a few things,’ his dad replied.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Uncle Dave chimed in, though he also sounded kind of nervous.

Travelling through the streets of London was always a slow, arduous process, but it felt even more so today. They were constantly stopping and starting for lights or traffic, and given that George didn’t even know where they were going, the whole ride seemed to go on and on and on. He popped in his headphones and tried to listen to some music, but he could never hear it over the rumbling of the van when he was in the back.

After what felt like hours, but his watch said was only twenty-five minutes, the engine cut out and the van was still.

‘Wait here,’ his dad said, hopping out the driver’s side door.

‘We’ll be back soon.’ His uncle turned and shot him an insincere thumbs up. Those were the last words he ever heard from Uncle Dave.

He watched through the windscreen as they walked off. The van was parked in a quiet gravel area of some industrial estate. Depots and manufacturing units lined up either side, and in front of them was a huge warehouse clad in corrugated iron. An opening on the side of it loomed in front of the van, seemingly immune to the bright rays of sunshine that should have lit up the interior. George looked on as the two of them went inside and disappeared from view.

The waiting was even worse than the drive over. There seemed to be no noise or activity of any sort from the rest of the estate, and he was left staring at his watch as the seconds ticked past, finally deciding to become a minute. Then two. Then three. At six minutes, George pulled open the side door and hopped down onto the gravel below.

The place seemed completely deserted. Some of the nearby industrial units were clearly in use, one of them even had a half-repaired Vespa still outside, tools scattered around it as if the folks working on it had simply put them down and left. Maybe everyone around here took lunch at the same time, George reasoned, trying to ignore the fact his watch said it was past

three in the afternoon. A late lunch, then. He'd had visions like this, of course, of an empty world, or someone trapped and abandoned, but this felt different. He was really here, for one thing, and it didn't actually feel empty, exactly. More like the world was holding its breath.

Why was he here? It was clearly something to do with him taking over the business. His father had recently started to show him tax stuff and how to talk to clients, so he knew he was being groomed to run it someday. But he didn't want to push out Uncle Dave or anything. Not that anyone had bothered to ask him. Besides, maybe his uncle *would* be better at it; he remembered how confused and stupid he felt when trying to understand the accounts, and he felt the shame of not being the son his father deserved.

How long had the two of them been gone now? The warehouse in front of him stood there patiently. Far from being reassuring, the sunlight seemed to fall on it with a savage harshness, bleaching it of colour and showing every faded rust hole and ancient stain on the metal that formed its skin. The glass of its windows was shattered, leaving only gaping sockets. It was a dead thing, a faded tombstone waiting in a long-forgotten cemetery.

At some point George had moved closer, though he couldn't have told you exactly when he decided to do so. The air around the place felt strange. There was no smell, but he could somehow taste something faintly metallic, and his jaw clenched so tight it felt as though his teeth were going to shatter.

Then there was a sound, a wet, cracking noise like a stick of celery being snapped in two, and the feeling vanished. George was simply standing there in front of a warehouse, hearing the sound of footsteps approaching from inside. He hurried back to the van and climbed inside, sliding the door shut behind him. As he did so, he caught sight of two men on the other side of the yard, working on repairing a Vespa.

A minute later the driver's door opened and his dad got in. He didn't say anything, but started the engine.

'Aren't we picking something up?' George asked.

'They didn't have any,' his father replied without turning.

'Where's Uncle Dave?'

The question hung in the air for a long moment.

'He had to head off. Said he'd meet us later.'

And then they drove away.

How could someone so loud die so quietly? That was the thought that rattled through Mary's head on the drive over to clean out George's tiny flat. But then again, all the Slough deaths were quiet. Sometimes you barely noticed them happen. Her mother was the first, when Mary was three, and she was never discussed. Then Grandpa, who apparently got shuffled off in his sleep. Then Uncle Dave, who one day just stopped being there. And now, finally, George.

Uncle Dave. The memory made her shudder slightly. It had been seven years since George had told her what he had seen (or rather, what he hadn't) on that grim old industrial estate, the last time any of them had seen their uncle, and neither of them had ever been able to look at their father in quite the same way again. Mary had always held a deep terror that he had done it, killed Uncle Dave with his own two hands. George had always shaken his head at the suggestion, though he never volunteered what his own suspicions might have been.

He had talked to Mary less and less as the years went on, especially after Xen had joined them on jobs. At that point they had split into two groups, with Mary and her sister always working in one part of a job and George and their dad working on another. Xen didn't seem to mind too much, if she even noticed, but Mary remembered how close she'd been to her brother, how he used to talk to her about the things he felt. The things he saw. Now she didn't know what was going on. But she knew that his visions had been getting worse.

He would fade out for longer, staring into space for minutes on end, and sometimes Mary would even notice scratches or bruises on him. At first, she thought he might have been doing them to himself, but they were never there before he suited up for a job, and when he took off his coverall, she saw them clear as day.

And there were the fights between him and their dad. Disobedience, quiet recriminations when they thought they couldn't be heard and, most damningly in the eyes of their father, too many *questions*. The tensions had lingered both on and off the job, an air of secrets that didn't seem entirely to lift even when George had decided to move out of the family home last year and find a place of his own. Just before he quit the business. Just before he died.

The drive over was absolutely silent. Xen didn't take control of the CD player, there was no idle chatter between the sisters, even the road around them seemed to be keeping itself respectfully muted. It took a long time to find parking near the squat block of flats that Mary had only had a chance to visit once before for an impromptu housewarming. Even having found a spot it was going to be a good five minute walk on foot, so they loaded up with bags and crates of equipment and cleaning supplies and made the trek over. Mary had never made a journey that felt slower, like a hollow pilgrimage, until they found themselves standing outside the door that had once belonged to her brother. Her father pulled out a set of keys and unlocked it. As he did so Mary glimpsed the small printed 'Slough & Sons' keychain that George had had made years back when he'd tried to explain 'branding' to their father. She looked away so the others wouldn't see her tears.

The funeral had only been yesterday. A larger affair than they'd anticipated – it turned out George had a lot more friends than any of them had been aware of. It shouldn't really have come as a surprise; he'd always had a knack for making people like him. It both hurt and comforted Mary, knowing that George, the golden child, had never fully belonged to them. She should have known that one day he would leave the family completely. In some ways being surrounded by strangers had almost made the day easier, made it so it didn't feel like they were alone, wallowing in isolated grief. But now they were here and it was just the three of them. Xen had suggested leaving it a week, but their dad had been adamant about doing it now. Just get it out the way. Don't let it fester.

It was strange, though. George had said their father had always cleaned up family alone. Grandpa, Uncle Dave … But he'd been adamant they join him for this one. It didn't matter. Even if she'd had the stomach to ask, she knew her dad wouldn't answer. His reasons, as ever, were his own.

The flat looked exactly the same as it had the last time Mary had been over, except that George's booming voice wasn't there to greet them, offering them a cup of tea or a beer. He never remembered to buy beers in, but he always offered them anyway, like it was a reflex.

'I'll take the bathroom,' her dad said.

'I'll help.' Xen stepped forward, trying her best to sound determined. Mary stayed quiet. She felt like a coward for not trying to join, but she

didn’t think she could face cleaning the room where her brother had died.

‘No.’ Her dad placed a massive hand on Xen’s shoulder. His voice was firm. ‘You take the kitchen. I’m doing it alone.’

‘Why?’ Xen said. There was anger in her voice but she already knew she’d lost the argument.

Their father didn’t reply, simply picking up his bag and walking down the corridor towards the bathroom. The door shut behind him, followed by the click of the flimsy lock.

Xen looked at the door for a few moments, then picked up the box she had been carrying and headed towards the kitchen.

‘I guess I’m on the bedroom, then,’ Mary said to nobody.

The next couple of hours were a blur of cleaning and crying as she stumbled across one thing after another that summoned memories of George, of the times they had spent together. Of life before this axe had come down and cut her off from ever feeling normal again.

Then she opened the cabinet under his old record player. George had always thought of himself as a bit of an audiophile and when he had moved out had convinced their dad to give him his ancient turntable. It was old and battered, the wood-effect casing had long since peeled away from around the logo of an electronics company that didn’t exist anymore. It stood at chest height on top of a white wooden cabinet, which Mary opened expecting to find rows of old LPs.

Instead, what she found was an idiosyncratic display of drawings, pendants and small statues. The blue and white design of the Nazar eye seemed to feature prominently, as well as various runes and markings, some drawn on paper stuck to the inside of the cabinet, others carved directly into the wood. There were crucifixes and pentagrams and small figures and symbols from various religious traditions, as well as dried plants that Mary didn’t immediately recognise. The back wall and ceiling of the cabinet were lined with mirrors, giving her a good look at her own confused face.

Apotropaic magic, items intended to offer spiritual defence and ward off bad luck or harmful influences. Mary was vaguely familiar with it, and even had an evil eye bracelet she sometimes wore, but this was another level entirely. It was as if George had been obsessively trying to ward off something. Something bad.

There were only two items in the cabinet that didn’t seem to fit with the rest: a black faux-leather notebook and a small instant camera. She took the camera out first, looking it over and grabbing the half-dozen white-framed pictures it had apparently taken. The device seemed normal enough, and would have been fully functional, save for the fact that the lens seemed to have been shattered. There was no sign of other damage that would indicate it had been dropped or suffered any similar fate. Mary looked through the pictures then, each of which seemed to be a relatively normal street scene during the day. There was nothing obvious connecting them, except for one part of each photograph that was pale and faded to white, as though it had been massively overexposed. This was even the case for one of them that looked like it had been taken at night.

The notebook sat there, waiting for her. Mary knew what it was. She’d seen George scribbling in it enough times, always after he had spaced out on a job. She had never got the courage to actually ask him about it, not after he’d stopped talking to her about his visions, but she knew it was the journal where he noted down what he saw. For a long moment she couldn’t decide whether to open it or throw it away. George’s death was no reason to pry into something he’d been so keen to keep secret, but Mary could not convince herself that what she was looking at in this cabinet had nothing to do with his death. That book could contain clues that might help.

Taking a deep breath, Mary opened it. The first page was blank. As was the second page. And the third, the fourth … She flicked through it. There was nothing in there. Her first thought was that this must be a new notebook, that he hadn’t started using it yet, but the pages were worn, and many had creases or stains on them. It had definitely been used, and a lot. There just wasn’t any writing on it.

Then Mary turned to the last page and froze. She stared for a long time at what was written there, in thick black marker that bled out across the page. It was scrawled in a rough, almost childlike handwriting, like whoever wrote it didn’t know how to hold a pen.

YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU LEAVE

13

Connections

Neither Diya nor Mary spoke for a long time. Around them, the sounds of the cafe had quieted to a burbling background murmur. A thousand questions swirled through Diya's mind at what she had been told, coffee long gone cold between her hands. How much of it could she believe? Surely she should take them for exactly what they were: half-remembered stories told by a dead brother, and strange discoveries made by a grief-fuelled imagination. It wasn't as though George was around to confirm any of his sister's wild assertions. But there was no deception in Mary's face, and after everything Diya had seen and heard over the months they had worked together, she couldn't just dismiss what she had heard.

'What did you do with it?' Diya asked at last, her voice surprisingly calm. 'The notebook and the other stuff?'

'What could I do?' Mary did an admirable job keeping her voice steady. 'I threw the stuff away and cleaned it up. Xen wouldn't have understood and Dad, well, I don't know how much I trust him with this.'

'But you said it was protective, if you got rid of it …' Mary did believe this stuff, after all.

'What? My brother might die again?' Her voice stung with bitterness. 'It didn't work the first time, did it?'

'No,' Diya said. 'No, it didn't.'

'You don't have to believe me,' Mary said, and for a moment Diya worried she might just be psychic after all. 'But I thought you deserved to know.'

'Yeah, thanks.' Even having listened to the whole story, Diya wasn't sure what she *did* know. She took a deep breath. If she was going to accept any

of this, she might as well dive all the way in. ‘You said George started getting marks on him? Injuries?’

‘When they started getting really bad, his visions.’ Mary nodded. ‘That was around when he stopped talking to me about them.’

Diya slowly slid up her sleeve, showing the half-healed scrape she’d received at Cottage Grove. Mary watched, like she had been waiting for this moment. Like she was finally about to be believed.

‘What does it mean?’ A half-sob escaped Diya before she could stifle it. ‘What is happening to me?’

The sudden break in her friend’s demeanour caught Mary off-guard, and she fumbled for an answer.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Could it be …’ Diya tried to pick her next words carefully. ‘Could it be something to do with your dad?’

Mary shook her head violently.

‘No. With Grandpa and Uncle Dave, I’ve no idea, I only know what George told me. But I know, I *know* that my dad would never have hurt George. He’d have died himself before he let anything happen to him. And even if … George just slipped in the shower and broke his neck. The bathroom door was locked. No sign of a struggle. Nothing suspicious. Just an accident.’

Her voice had become flat as she rattled off the words that police officers must have repeated to her over and over again when it happened.

Diya didn’t respond immediately. There was something missing from Mary’s story, a hole at the centre that maybe she didn’t notice, but was glaring to Diya.

‘Did George ever talk about seeing a man?’

‘A man? What kind of man?’

‘He’s hard to describe, very ordinary looking, but he’s always there when *it* happens.’

‘I don’t know.’ Another shake of the head. ‘George never said—’

‘What do you know about “Mr Bill”?’

That got a reaction.

‘Mr Bill? Not much. He gives my dad jobs sometimes. Xen doesn’t like him. I mean, I’ve only met him once but I didn’t really like him either. Kind of a creepy guy. Smiles too much.’

‘Did George ever mention him?’

‘I don’t think… Wait, yeah.’ Mary furrowed her brow in thought. ‘About a year and a half ago, maybe. I don’t know the details, but George and my dad got into a big fight. I think it was about Mr Bill.’

‘Was that around the time he moved out?’

‘Yeah, but I—’

She stopped short, and her face turned pale as Diya felt a presence loom up behind her.

‘Mary,’ Frank rumbled.

‘Hi, Mr Slough, um … Can we help you?’ Diya asked, as Mary froze.

He stood there, looking down on the array of discarded plates and coffee cups that littered the table. The light from the front window rendered him a featureless silhouette, but even if she’d been able to see his face, Diya knew that blank, unreadable expression well.

‘I need to talk to Mary. Xen said she was down here. Didn’t realise she was meeting you, Diya. Don’t mean to bother you.’

‘N-no, it’s OK.’ Diya had no idea how long he’d been standing nearby, what he might have overheard.

‘Come on, Mary.’

‘Yeah.’ There was no fear in Mary’s voice, just a deep resignation. ‘I’m coming. I’ll, uh, see you later, Diya. Thanks for the tea.’

‘Come on,’ Frank said. ‘And I’m sure Diya’s had enough of our little family drama for one day.’

The phone buzzed insistently in Diya’s pocket. She quickly swiped through her intricate lock screen and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of Mary’s message.

yeah I’m OK

It had only been a few hours since her abrupt departure from the coffee shop and Diya’s mind had run through every scenario from ‘everything’s fine’ to ‘last one to see Mary Slough alive’, and had settled on the most likely outcome being ‘Diya is fired for being nosy’. The phone buzzed again with a follow-up message.

*turns out my dad *did* need help, printer trouble and Im the only one who can use it right*

Seriously? So, he didn't hear what we were saying? Diya's fingers flew over the on-screen keyboard.

Three dots appeared as Mary clearly typed and retyped her reply.

yeah he heard some it said at last.

Shit. Is he pissed off?

not at u, dont worry about it, hell calm down

Diya took a second to parse the message. She'd tried to phone Mary shortly after she'd left, but it had gone to voicemail. For a brief moment she had a burst of paranoia, and actually typed out *How do I know it's really you?* before deleting it. As if reading her mind, a picture popped up of Mary, wearing exactly the clothes she'd been in at the cafe, giving a thumbs-up in the Slough living room.

see? alive n well, im not murdered ur not fired, we're all good

OK, if you're sure. Sorry to put you in this position

i asked to meet u, not ur fault. talk later

And with that, the conversation ended. Diya considered sending a follow-up message, but if Frank was giving Mary a hard time, she didn't want to add any more worries by nagging for her own reassurance. All that talk of visions and death had clearly got inside Diya's head. Mary had been so adamant that Frank couldn't have had anything to do with what happened to George, but she had rarely felt like she was in danger as much as when he had appeared in that coffee shop. Even if he didn't do it directly, her suspicions that Slough & Sons were (perhaps unknowingly) working for a murderer were growing firmer, and the idea Frank had something to do with what happened to his son was hard to dismiss entirely. Or maybe he was just a grieving father trying to stay strong for his remaining children.

For a moment her thoughts dwelt on grief, on Angie. Diya knew she still had her own issues to deal with, and as she saw the sun slowly setting, she finally made up her mind on how to start. Grabbing the last of her belongings from the hotel, she cancelled her second night's booking and hopped on the short bus ride back to her home.

The light was almost gone when she approached her front door, and the lamp-posts were beginning to flick on one by one, but she didn't let her step waver. Light still shone from all the windows of her flat, and when she opened the front door she was reassured to see nothing had changed since she left. The coffee mugs still sat on the table, the TV was still playing what

she assumed was the same channel (she didn't really recall), and the only new additions were a few pieces of junk mail below the mail slot. She didn't pause long enough to consider the room in any more detail, marching over towards Angie's old room and unlocking the door. She stood before the closet, gripped the handle with both hands, and pulled it open.

It was empty. Of course it was, Diya told herself, it always had been. She'd been panicking after a weird dream. But had George thought the same thing before he 'slipped in the shower'? This was it, Diya felt, staring at the empty wardrobe. This was the moment she had to decide: did she believe what was happening to her was supernatural? Did she take Mary's story at face value?

Even as she asked herself the question, Diya knew she already had her answer. She'd still go to the doctor, of course. She chuckled bitterly. Maybe she'd get lucky and it would turn out just to be a massive brain tumour. But for now, as ridiculous as it sounded, the sensible thing to do was to assume that she was either being haunted or receiving psychic visions of the dead. Trying to figure out how and why, if there was any logic or reason for it, was probably more worthwhile than just ignoring it and hoping it went away.

But first, she needed to lie down. It had been a hell of a day. Before she left the room, she closed the window, trying not to think too hard about how it might have got open again.

The next day was quiet. No contact from Mary, and no jobs coming through from Frank. Diya tried not to dwell on that last point. While her contract with Slough & Sons meant they had to give her a few weeks' notice if she was officially fired, they could effectively drop her by just not calling her in for jobs. Still, it wasn't like there hadn't been entire weeks before without a call, and while the money never really seemed to stick around, the bills were paid up for the month and she had a while before she was in desperate need.

What she really needed to do was rest properly. The last few days had been weirdly intense and now that she'd convinced herself that her home was safe (or at least as safe as anywhere could be), it was time to make use of it. She needed an actual break.

And she did do her best to take one. She ordered a big pizza, put on some comfort movies, and tried to let her brain loosen and untangle the knot it had wrapped itself in. But the pizza was cold and all the toppings had shifted during the journey over, and she hadn't realised quite how many of her comfort movies were laced through with memories of Angie: mutually lusting after Clea DuVall in *But I'm a Cheerleader*, or doing bad Tom Waits impressions during *Wristcutters*. Eventually, she settled on *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

She'd always meant to show it to Angie, but she always said black-and-white films bored her to tears. Diya's father had a weird fascination with Cary Grant ('He's charm itself!' her dad would exclaim at least once each film), and growing up she had been shown basically every movie he'd starred in. This one was her favourite. She did wonder for a moment if a farce about hiding corpses in an old house might be a little too close to home, but after a few minutes she melted back into the rhythm of it, and even found herself laughing at a few forgotten jokes.

Then Cary Grant said something funny and she turned to make a comment about it to Angie and it hit her once again that she was alone. How did the pain still feel this fresh? Every time she let her guard down it seemed to race inside. She could distract herself, but the absence was always there, waiting.

Should she move? Her home, their home, was so full of those memories, but the thought of leaving it behind made Diya feel sick. Perhaps she should see people, be with people, try to be part of the world again, but as she looked through the messages on her phone, all she could think about was how strange it had felt to see Greg again, how little she had wanted to spend time with one of her oldest friends. And she could see no name in her contacts list that didn't make her feel the same way. She had cut herself off from her old life and didn't have the faintest idea how to go about getting it back, or even if she wanted to. She definitely didn't want to be alone, but beyond that …

Peter Lorre's voice oozed out of the television. She had completely forgotten about the film. So much for chilling out. Diya sighed and got up to make herself a cup of tea, letting the sounds of the movie become a comforting background noise. Maybe she was going about this the wrong way. Regardless of its disquieting conclusion (and how did the disappearing

typing fit into all of this anyway?), following the clues to that library in Beckton had been one of the few times she had felt properly in control of what was happening. For most of her time with Slough & Sons she had tried to push down the curiosity that drew her to wonder about the people they cleaned up after, thinking it was disrespectful to the dead to gawp at the details of their lives. But if the dead weren't going to leave her alone, then maybe it might help to do a little bit of investigating?

The thought fortified her somehow. She was reaching for the kettle when the sound of Cary Grant's increasingly desperate dialogue was abruptly drowned out by music erupting from her phone: heavy guitar and drums rolled as Kreator's *Enemy of God* (or was it *Satan is Real*? Something like that) told her exactly who was calling. Diya picked it up and hit pause on the movie.

'Hi Xen.'

'Hey, Diya, you all right? I heard you and Mary kind of had an awkward one. Sorry about that, didn't know it was you she was meeting.'

Was there a touch of recrimination in her voice? How much had Mary told her about what they were talking about?

'It's all right,' Diya said. 'She just wanted to fill me in on a few things. Is she OK?'

'Mary?' Xen let out a slightly derisive laugh. 'Yeah, she and Dad are in the hard silence phase of the fight. I don't know how they do it, to be honest. Just do some screaming at each other, get it out the way, that's what I say.'

'And how's that been working out for you?' Diya felt the tension inside her ease.

'Touché.'

Diya grinned, despite herself. Xen always said it so it sounded just a little like 'tooshee', and it tickled her more than it should.

'So, listen,' Xen continued. 'I know Mary can be a bit intense, and she said she gave you the low-down on George, which … Oof. I should probably have been the one to do. I just didn't want to lay it all on you, you know? Sorry, I'm rambling. Anyway, Mary said you said you hadn't been getting out much recently?'

Had Diya said that? They'd talked for hours, so it was certainly possible. Or maybe Mary had just intuited it. She felt a little bit hurt that 'Diya is a

lonely loser' had been one of Mary's takeaways from their meeting.

'I mean, I've been out … side. Sometimes,' Diya said, not wanting to let slip how desperate she was for some normal human contact.

'Hey, I get it. This job can be … It can be hard to keep old friends. Dunno why, just is.'

'Yeah, I just feel—'

'Like they won't understand?' Xen finished. 'I know. I mean, I've known the business all of my life and I still felt that way when I started going on jobs. You make new friends, though.'

'Do you now?'

'You do now, Ms Sceptical. I'm actually calling you to see if you play board games.'

'I've played … *Settlers of Catan*?' Diya said. It was a lie, but she'd heard of it.

'Good enough!' Xen was more excited than Diya had heard her for a long time. Maybe it wasn't just a pity ask. 'I help organise, like, a queer board game evening thing down at the Penderel's Oak near Chancery Lane. We're having one tonight and I think you should come along. I promise you'll like everyone. Almost everyone. Probably. I mean, I don't exactly have full control of the guest list, but it's a great crowd.'

Diya paused for a moment. She had no interest in board games (at least she didn't think she did) and it sounded like it might be a bit intense. But the thought of spending a normal evening in a well-lit pub that nobody had died in, of having a drink and chatting with amiable people who she didn't know, made her realise how acutely she had missed just being with friends.

'All right. You're on.'

'Brilliant! We generally get started around six. See you then!'

The phone disconnected. Xen wasn't quite as averse to phone calls as Mary, but she rarely stuck around to chat once the subject at hand had been resolved. Diya's thoughts dwelt on the prospect of hanging out with actual people and, for the first time in a long time, she wasn't actually dreading it.

With some time to kill before the pub, Diya decided to make good on her resolution to do a bit of digging into the dead. The revelations about George had given her a lot to think about, but left her with more questions than answers, and if Mary had more to tell it didn't look like Diya was getting it

any time soon. She wondered briefly whether she should ask Xen about it that evening, but it didn't seem right to bring it up around strangers. Besides, given the sisters' relationship, Diya was almost certain she now knew more about George's visions than Xen did.

Her first step was to look further into the man who had died outside The White Lion, which meant a return to the library. It was one of the few solid pieces of information she had and the memory of that text document deleting itself had lingered. She couldn't deny there was a pull to return. Maybe it was just her curiosity, finally allowed to run free, or maybe there was something else there. If it was ghosts, and they were trying to tell her something, it made sense to follow where her instincts led her. Unless they were luring her into some serial killer's trap. She shook her head to dismiss the thought of Mr Bill. That kind of paranoia wasn't going to help anything here.

When she arrived it was bitterly cold, and the library's windows were ever so slightly fogged with condensation, giving the place an oddly sleepy air. Inside, the aggressive warmth of a heating system enveloped her and she was almost immediately compelled to remove her coat. Still, it was a lovely change from the icy wind outside, and she breathed it in, letting the warm air shift the frost that had settled in her lungs.

One of the library staff watched her levelly from behind the desk. He was a tall man, a little past middle age, with a slight stoop from a life spent hunched over desks. He wore his shirt and tie like they were a half-hearted disguise, and the name tag 'Raymond' hung from the front pocket. His manner was expectant, but not especially curious. Looking around, Diya saw a half-dozen other patrons silently browsing or reading, and the only sound was the gentle rumble of the heating vents.

'Afternoon,' Raymond said as soon as she was close enough to speak to quietly. 'How can I help?'

'I'm looking for—' Diya started, but the man gestured that he couldn't hear her.

'You don't actually have to whisper.' He smiled indulgently.

'Oh, right, sorry,' Diya said, a little embarrassed. 'I'm looking for some information on someone who was a member of the library.'

'OK.' Raymond seemed hesitant. 'There's a limit to how much we can give out. Data confidentiality and all that. What's this about?'

Diya took a moment to consider her lie, realising that one of the downsides with following her instincts was that she hadn't actually come up with anything resembling a plan.

'I found a library card for someone and wanted to get a bit more information on them.'

'That's no problem,' Raymond said. 'If you give it back to us, we should be able to post it to them.'

'I … don't have it with me.' Diya could feel the flimsy falsehood already falling apart.

'Right, OK … Well, do you know the name that was on it?'

She froze. Of course she didn't know the name. She couldn't remember any of their names. It was one of the few things she was certain of. This whole thing was stupid, what had she expected? Coming all the way down here on a ghost hunt. What was she thinking?

'I'm sorry,' Diya said abruptly, turning away. 'I've wasted your time. Excuse me.'

She hurried quickly into the library proper, leaving the man staring after her in confusion. It had been a mistake to come here. This was just a place that a poor soul had used to rest, to get a little bit warm.

She stopped abruptly in front of the doors. There was that tug again inside her, urging her back inside. Towards the computer desks, where the stranger's final message had been. Maybe that was it. Maybe there was another vision waiting for her here. If so, did she need to trigger it, somehow?

Grabbing a random book from a nearby shelf, Diya collapsed into one of the chairs. A wave of fatigue seemed to wash over her (was that something, or was she just actually that tired?) and she propped the book open in front of her.

Across from her, a woman with thick black hair was reading to a small child from a bright book titled *A Hole in the Bottom of the Sea*. She was whisper-singing to the little girl sitting on her knee, trying to give the tune while making as little noise as possible.

'There's a *crab* and a *squid* and an *eel* and a *shark* in the hole in the bottom of the sea …'

Something in the woman's voice seemed oddly familiar to Diya, and for a moment she was gripped with the strongest sense of deja vu.

‘Leanne?’ she said. The name came to mind reflexively, without conscious thought.

The dark-haired stranger looked up.

‘Yes?’ she said, surprised. She spent a few seconds staring at Diya, clearly trying to place her, then shook her head apologetically. ‘I’m sorry, have we met?’

‘No, I’m sorry.’ Diya was suddenly aware of how awkward the situation was. ‘This must be Lexi.’

That last part passed her lips before she was able to stop it. The little girl lifted her head and beamed in recognition of her name, but her mother’s face turned guarded. Something clicked in Diya’s mind. The dead man. The names from his vanished note. She could still feel him, ever so slightly. Estranged from his family, he’d come here to this place of comfort and warm memories, where he knew they still visited. Never while they’d been here, of course, he couldn’t let them see him in such a state, but sometimes it was like he could sense when they had been.

‘Lexi, why don’t you go get another book,’ the woman said, and the little girl dutifully toddled off towards the bookshelf, her face set into a tiny expression of determination. Her mother turned back towards Diya.

‘Do I know you?’ she asked, her suspicion now undisguised.

‘I … I knew your …’ Diya took a guess. ‘Husband?’

‘No, you didn’t.’ Leanne’s voice had completely pivoted to hostility.

‘Lexi’s father, then,’ she tried.

‘Look, I don’t know who you are, or how you know our names, but please leave us alone.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Diya tried to back-pedal, her own desperation leaking into her voice. ‘I just, I need to speak with you. It’s important. I need to know more about … I mean, I don’t know exactly what he was to you, but Lexi’s father. He died.’ She flushed – had the woman known that?

Diya tried to blink away a tear. There was a long pause, and when she looked up she could see Leanne’s expression had softened. The woman sighed.

‘Whatever this is, I’m sorry, but I can’t help you. I don’t know who Lexi’s father was. And I’ve never been married.’

The back of Diya’s mind screamed that this wasn’t right. She *had* known. They *had* been a family. But there was no deception in the woman’s

face. The memory was simply gone.

‘You’re sure?’

Leanne looked for a moment as though she was trying to think, but then a distant expression came over her and she didn’t say anything. Then the moment passed and the suspicion returned full force.

‘Come on, Lexi, we’re leaving.’

Diya wanted to follow her, to talk to her, beg her to stay, to try and find the right words to jog the memory loose, but she just watched as the woman picked up her smiling daughter and started towards the exit. Just before she was gone she turned back.

‘What was his name?’ Leanne Mitchell asked, uncertainty creeping into her voice.

Diya shook her head, fully herself again.

‘I don’t remember.’

The warmth of the air inside Penderel’s Oak wrapped around Diya as she came inside. She’d passed the place a dozen times when she was still working office jobs, and the outside of it had always been buzzing with clean-cut business suits from the city; a dense crowd of well-groomed young go-getters without a soul to share between them. Now it seemed quiet, with that odd peace that settled over some areas of central London when the work day was over, reminding you how few people actually lived there anymore.

She’d had several hours to get over the strange encounter at the library and had decided that she wasn’t going to let it ruin this evening. The smell of old beer and greasy pub food that greeted her on entering immediately washed away the last lingering traces of unease and it dawned on her she hadn’t eaten since breakfast. The interior was all shiny dark wood and faux-old-fashioned furnishings, like any other Wetherspoons, punctuated by bright images flashing over the screen of a quiz machine in the corner. Even though she was sure she’d never actually been inside before, it was immediately familiar and incredibly comforting.

A quick glance around showed no sign of Xen or any of her friends, but the pub seemed to be deeper than it first appeared, and Diya slowly headed further in, with the slightly apologetic gait of someone trying to telegraph they might be in the wrong place. She glanced along the bar, and noticed a

short man with a closely shaven beard standing at the end. Bright gold nail varnish stood out starkly against the dark skin of his hands and he wore a black T-shirt with the words BIG DEATH ENERGY spelled out in large white sans serif letters. Diya felt herself relax. She had no idea who the man was, but she knew a friend of Xen's when she saw one.

'Diya!' the voice rang out almost on cue, and she looked over to see her friend waving from a slightly lowered area near the back of the pub.

It wasn't too long before she was sat at a table with beer in her hand and an array of brightly coloured cards laid out in front of her, playing something called *Machi Koro* as people she had never met before grinned and cursed at each other. Xen was off talking to (chatting up?) the guy Diya had seen at the bar, whose name was Jack, but everyone around the table seemed very welcoming. There was Rose, who always blew on the dice before rolling them and was a little bit further into her drinks than the rest of them; Richard, who kept explaining the rules to Diya even though she was pretty sure she'd got them down already; and Damian, who didn't talk too much, but got her a drink when she first sat down. There were other tables, maybe a dozen people in all, but she'd already forgotten most of their names.

It was loud but not obnoxious, warm but not close, and friendly but not overbearing. Diya found she rarely had anything to contribute to the conversation about genre novels or video equipment, but she was happy to simply feel like a part of the real world for once. Soon enough an hour had passed and Diya was astounded to see how little of her beer had gone. Had it been so long she'd somehow forgotten how to drink?

At one point, Rose began talking about some housemate drama she was having, and there was a sudden pang of Angie's memory, the sort of feeling that would have reduced her to tears alone in her home, but here she let it pass through her. It was followed by a smaller pang of guilt, as though not letting the feeling overwhelm her was somehow disrespectful to her dead friend, but that too vanished after a few moments.

For the first time in a long time Diya felt completely safe. Since fleeing her house, the worry had been nagging at her that she was alone, cut off from the world like the others who had died. (Died? Or been killed by a nondescript stranger with a nasty smile?) But not here. Not surrounded by friends and light and laughter.

‘You work with Xen, right?’ Rose asked as she mulled over her choice of card.

It took Diya a moment to register that the question was addressed to her.

‘Uh, yeah. Started a few months ago.’

‘How’re you finding it?’

‘Yeah,’ Richard chimed in. ‘Xen doesn’t really talk about it. It’s like, taking away corpses, right?’

‘Not really,’ Diya said. ‘We usually go in after any bodies are gone. Then we clean up.’

‘Sounds like a lot.’ Rose was thoughtful.

‘It is sometimes.’

‘You don’t need to talk about it if it makes you uncomfortable,’ Damian said from across the table.

Diya took a moment to consider his words. *Did* it make her uncomfortable to talk about? The visions, sure, she wouldn’t want to share that with strangers, but the job itself?

‘I mean, it’s just cleaning, really. It’s kind of sad, but at the end of the day it’s just a cleaning job with a few extra regulations.’

‘I mean, it’s not *just* cleaning, though, is it?’ Richard said. ‘There must be a lot more … bodily stuff. Right?’

‘I guess.’ Diya shrugged. ‘But you do get that stuff in normal cleaning jobs as well sometimes.’

‘Yeah,’ Rose piped up. ‘I was a cleaner for a couple of years at uni, and let me tell you, some people do not take care of their bathrooms.’

‘I guess it can be gross,’ Diya continued, ‘and it can feel a bit morbid. At the end of the day, though, it’s just a job that needs doing.’

‘Well, maybe we’ll get some gory stories out of *you*, then.’ Richard grinned.

‘Xen really doesn’t talk about it? I thought she’d be really into sharing all the horrible details.’

‘Nah, says its family stuff. And I know better than to ask too much about someone’s family, you know?’

Diya nodded, but her gaze drifted across the bar to Xen. It was family stuff, that was for sure, and there was more to it than anyone was letting on. Mary’s story about George wasn’t all there was to the situation, of that Diya

was sure. Visions and killers and cleaning away the traces. How much did Xen know? What wasn't she telling Diya?

'I'm getting another round,' Rose announced, breaking through Diya's pondering. 'Who needs a top-up?'

14

The Greenwich Park Job

Coming to was a slow and bleary process. Diya could feel her face pressed against fabric, not the soft sheets of a bed, but something a little bit rougher. She shifted her weight and a cushion tumbled off the edge of the sofa she was lying on. Blinking a few times, she looked at the room around her. The ceiling light wasn't on, but a beam of sunlight had managed to push its way through a gap in the curtains to illuminate a living room she'd only previously seen a few times through the window. She didn't think she'd ever before actually crossed the threshold into the Slough family home. It wasn't exactly the way she'd hoped to do so either, she thought, wiping away a thin line of actual honest-to-god drool from the corner of her mouth. What she wouldn't have given to be back at her place where she could get a shower and a change of clothes. Obviously Xen had thought she'd been doing Diya a favour, but she could have passed out on her own sofa, surely.

An attempt to get to her feet was immediately abandoned as Diya's head throbbed so powerfully it felt like she went momentarily blind. How much had she drunk last night? Her eyes fell on the coffee table in front of her, with its two empty wine bottles and an ashtray full of Xen's cigarette butts. A memory flashed up: thick smoke, wine, Rose, Xen and Damian sat there with her, all of them talking drunken garbage about consciousness and the nature of the soul. She tried to smile, but the hangover was too painful. What time even was it?

The living room looked like it hadn't changed much since the eighties. No, that wasn't quite true. Nothing had *changed* since then, the wallpaper, the carpet, the thick nicotine-stained drapes, all of it looked as though it hadn't shifted in forty years, but things had been added on top of it. The

space over the decommissioned fireplace was taken up with a huge flatscreen TV; a freshly assembled IKEA bookshelf sat in the corner, filled with comics and movies; a nest of cables surrounded a desktop computer in the corner that still had a CRT monitor. It was as though generations had layered themselves on top of this room, cluttering it with new lives without taking anything away. It was too much to think about when she was this hungover.

The living room door opened slowly, and a chill ran through Diya as she turned to find Frank standing in the doorway. She hadn't even made the connection that he would be here too, the first time she'd seen him since he took Mary away. His eyes were unreadable, before he nodded to a cup of steaming coffee in his hands. Nervous as she was, it wasn't an offer she was going to turn down.

'Yes,' Diya said quietly. 'Please.'

Frank came over and set the mug down on the table in front of her.

'Good night?' he asked.

'Sorry about crashing.' Diya took a big sip of the coffee and exhaled. 'I didn't plan to.'

'S'all right,' Frank said, drinking from his own mug, which was printed with a faded photograph of Edinburgh Castle. 'Xen has friends round plenty. I'm used to it.'

Diya took a moment to try to work out if that was a passive aggressive recrimination of some sort, but he seemed like he was being honest.

'Where is Xen?' she asked. 'Is she up yet?'

Frank shook his head and pointed upwards, presumably towards Xen's room.

'Probably not before midday. Mary might be down soon, though.'

'Oh,' Diya said, not sure what else to say. 'Right.'

'Wanted to talk to you anyway,' he continued. 'Thought I should try to explain myself. After what Mary said.'

The coffee stopped halfway to Diya's lips. Not now. Please not *now*.

'Could, um, could we talk about it later?' Diya gestured to her forehead. 'I'm just really not feeling up to it at the moment.'

'Just wanted to say I'm sorry I didn't explain about George sooner. Should've told you. You got a right to know what you're stepping into.'

He paused, like a runner pacing himself. Diya was about to try and tell him he didn't need to explain, but he barrelled on, regardless.

'You see, Mary, she gets all sorts of ideas in her head, lets them run away with her sometimes. I loved George. He was a good lad, a great worker. I told him not to leave.'

Another pause.

'I would never hurt him.'

There was such a simple pain in those five words that Diya felt a stab of shame at some of the darker suspicions that had crossed her mind about Frank Slough.

'I know there's things he didn't tell me. Maybe he should have, but I did my best for him, I really did.'

This time he seemed to be finished.

'OK,' was all that Diya could muster up in response. 'Thank you for telling me.'

A look of irritation passed across Frank's face, clearly not aimed at her, but at himself. He sat down on a patchy leather armchair and stared into his coffee. He looked like there was more he wanted to say, but it seemed like he just didn't have the words for it. In that moment Diya felt an incredible pity for him.

'Look, Mr Slough—'

'Frank.'

'Frank, you really don't need to say all this. I know that you didn't …'

'Murder my son?'

He said it so off-handedly that it took a moment to register he'd said it at all.

'Yeah …' She tried to swallow another mouthful of coffee. 'That.'

Frank took a breath and began to say something else when he was cut off by a harsh buzzing from his phone. His eyes flicked down towards it with, was that a moment of fear?

'Sorry,' he said, standing a little bit too quickly. 'Gotta take this.'

And then he was out of the room, the heavy door swinging shut behind him as Diya tried to decide whether she was more relieved that the conversation was over or worried about whatever phone call seemed to have Frank so on edge. Something was nagging at her, but whatever it was couldn't quite get through the hangover. She fished a couple of painkillers

out of her bag, downed them with the rest of her coffee, and then slipped back onto the sofa and let herself drift into a half-sleep.

It might have been hours later or it might only have been a few minutes when the door opened again and Frank returned. There was more noise now, the sounds of clumsy movement from the room overhead shook the bones of the old house and there was a brief second where an image of it all collapsing down on her as it had at Cottage Grove flashed through Diya's mind. She tried to shake the confusion and saw Frank pulling a bag from one of the cupboards.

'You up?' he said curtly. There was no trace of his awkward attempt at connecting with her. 'We've got a job.'

Diya groaned inwardly, only realising afterwards that she'd made the sound very much outwardly as well. If Frank noticed, he didn't react, his attention focused on the contents of his bag.

'Now?' was all she could muster.

'Sounds like an urgent one. We're off in five.'

Standing up from the sofa was a lot more complicated than Diya remembered it being. She willed her feet onto the floor one by one and pulled herself upright. Every joint creaked as her body finally got vertical. She never used to get hangovers like this. When had she got so old?

The thought almost made her laugh as the grey-haired Frank moved around the room with speed and certainty, no longer paying her much in the way of attention.

She washed up in the bathroom, her reflection afterwards surprisingly together. Bloodshot eyes the only giveaway to how dreadful she actually felt.

The same could not be said of Xen, who was standing in the hallway trying to put on her long black coat with middling success. Her expression spoke very clearly of the situation she found herself in, and even through the pounding of her own head Diya felt a pang of pity. Mary waited there as well, awake and ready and clearly trying not to be too smug at their suffering.

'You two have fun last night?'

Xen made a noise that might have been a reply but was not a recognisable word in any human tongue.

‘We did,’ Diya said, with a little bit more success. ‘Sorry if we kept you up.’

‘You didn’t,’ Mary said brightly. ‘I’m actually feeling remarkably well-rested.’

‘Fucker,’ Xen said, having found her way to an actual word.

Mary grinned. If there was an undercurrent to it, Diya wasn’t in a fit state to pick up on it. She was, at the very least, glad to see Mary in such good humour, a stark contrast to their last meeting. Maybe it was all going to be OK after all.

‘Do you know anything about where we’re going?’ Diya asked.

‘Gonna be a Mr Bill job,’ Xen mumbled. ‘Fuckin’ bet you.’

‘I don’t know, I’m afraid,’ Mary said.

‘He’s always doing this. His jobs are always at the worst times.’

‘Sorry if the dead don’t keep up with your social life,’ Frank said, appearing in the doorway to the living room. ‘Come on. We’ve got work to do.’

Apparently a body had been found early that morning in Greenwich Park, and they were going to take care of it. Just the idea of having to do a clean-up job with this hangover caused Diya’s nausea to spike. Still, it wasn’t as if she was normally feeling perky and bright and eager (crying herself to sleep on the sofa most nights wasn’t conducive to being a morning person) and at least this one was going to be in the open.

Sure enough, when the van door opened, the rush of clean, cold air was almost euphoric. Diya breathed in deeply, savouring it despite the late-autumn chill and bruised sky that promised more rain.

‘Do we know anything more about this?’ Xen asked as she stepped shakily out of the passenger door.

‘It’s a bit of a way from the car park, so grab what you need now. Standard kit should be fine.’

They suited up, trying to ignore the stares they were getting from a few passers-by. It was a grim Wednesday morning, so there weren’t as many people about as Diya had worried there might be.

‘You think it’s a “found by a dog-walker” situation?’ Xen asked, trying to regain her morbid good humour.

‘She means a murder,’ Mary explained to Diya, with a slightly withering glance at her sister. ‘Xen’s never actually had a murder, and is desperate to do one.’

‘I am not desperate. Anyway, what about that Hackney hit-and-run?’

‘No proof it was intentional.’

‘It was the guy’s wife,’ Xen insisted. ‘You’re telling me it’s a coincidence?’

The argument faded to background noise as they made their way from the van. *They might all be murders.* Diya couldn’t dismiss the thought that pressed into her mind. But she couldn’t say it out loud. Not yet.

The trek up through the park was invigorating and exhausting in roughly equal measure. By the time they could see the small copse of trees marked off by police tape Diya felt like the worst of the hangover had passed, but she was now aware of quite how little sleep she’d had.

A single police officer stood off to one side, an expression of deep boredom on his face as he half-heartedly shooed away a curious visitor. Frank made his way over and began talking to him. Diya found herself instinctively following him closer, her brain still too foggy to hang back as she normally would.

‘What’s the deal?’ Frank asked, lowering his bag onto the ground.

‘Some junkie OD’d in the trees,’ the police officer said with a snort. ‘They took the body, but said we needed to call you guys. They wanted to make sure it was clean before dropping the tape. It was there a while.’

‘Nobody noticed?’

‘Guess not.’

‘Hm. Anything else we should know?’

‘Don’t think so. You got the number to call when you’re done?’

‘Yup.’

‘Excuse me.’ Diya couldn’t stop herself.

‘What?’ The cop sounded irritated.

‘Is there anything … strange. About the body?’

‘Like what?’

It was a simple enough question, and Diya could feel both the officer and Frank waiting for her answer. But what the hell *was* she expecting? A haunted baby doll, maybe? A panicked note that deleted itself? A phone full of pictures of a bizarre stalker?

‘… There’s no chance it could have been a murder, is there?’

‘If it was a possible murder,’ the cop didn’t even pretend to hide his disdain, ‘then I would have said to your *boss* that it was a possible murder. I didn’t. Clear enough for you?’

And with that he turned and stomped away. Frank didn’t say anything. He just looked at her for a few moments before calling the others over. He seemed on edge in a way Diya hadn’t picked up on earlier, but as her hangover cleared she could notice the tension in his face.

‘Right, we need to check the area for fluids. Might not be much, but we need to be thorough. Probably looking for vomit, but maybe some blood as well. Be careful and take your time.’

Xen and Mary nodded and headed off towards the small clump of trees. Diya followed them, realising that she didn’t really know what the procedure was in this sort of situation. She jogged up to Xen.

‘How does this one work?’

‘It varies,’ Xen said, quietly enough that it was clear the fresh air had not refreshed her quite as much as it had Diya. ‘Often for outdoor bodies, missing persons and that, once the whole “crime scene” thing is done and the body itself is carted off, they just kind of leave it. If it’s off the beaten path, then most of it washes away with the next rain and what isn’t tends to get dealt with by wildlife.’

‘So why are we even here?’

‘I mean, it’s a public park, so I guess they don’t want to wait. It’s mostly washing what we can and diluting what we can’t so it soaks away into the soil. There’s only so many chemicals we can use without damaging the plants. They mostly just want to be sure that no park-goers end up having a picnic over here and finding a chunk of some dude’s face. Plus, it sounds like the body was here a while, which means animals will have got to it so there might be, uh, bits over a wider area.’

The explanation seemed to have taken what little energy Xen could muster, and she slumped off towards where Mary was already picking through the trees. Diya followed suit. She hadn’t done a park before, but the skills were coming to her more easily.

It was dingy inside the small, wooded area, the canopy cutting off what little light made it through the thick clouds, and the distant sounds of the city seemed to fade away inside it. After a minute or two of straining to

examine a tree trunk, Diya noticed Mary had brought out a small torch to help her and did the same.

Beyond the trees, down the wide-open green spaces, shone the angular white shape of The Queen's House. It hadn't been an actual royal residence for centuries, and Diya half-remembered it being used as a museum or similar these days, but it seemed to preside over the whole process in the distance. A shining block of nobility watching them as they squinted for spots of blood on the damp soil.

The cop had certainly been right about there not being much for them to do. Xen managed to find some small traces (in fact, yelling 'I got puke!' was the most excited Diya had heard her all day), but for the most part there seemed little to no evidence anyone had ever set foot there, let alone died. Diya found herself considering each patch of ground that might theoretically have been large enough for an adult to be laid out in, trying to guess where the body might have been.

Another addict. Her mind shifted back to the man they had pressure washed away outside of that grim pub. Once, shortly after her first few jobs, Mary had told her that they helped to give peace to the bereaved and make their loss less burdensome. Maybe that had been true after Angie, but the more jobs she went on with Slough & Sons, the more Diya thought their main task was making it so that the people society left to die could do so without the rest of the world having to notice.

Or was Xen right? Was this a murder? Were they all murders? She couldn't shake the feeling that 'Mr Bill' was somehow responsible, even though she was at a loss to explain how. Was this the job where he had taken a more direct hand in ending things? Xen had been joking, mostly, Diya was pretty sure of that, but the question remained: How much did the Sloughs know?

As she emerged from the trees, the sky was darker still, though so far it was still dry. She considered finding a nearby slope and sitting down, but her eyes fell on an inviting patch of grass that lay just off the main path, about twenty yards from the police tape. Diya couldn't have said what made it seem so inviting, but she sat down and pulled off her mask to take in a big lungful of air. While she would still have hesitated to call the atmosphere here entirely clean, the stagnant dust of the city was less oppressive, and

tinged with the delicate smells of nature. She took in a breath, realising as she did so that she was not doing so entirely as herself.

It was happening again, and for a long moment Diya was torn between trying to fight it or to let it wash over her. It might hurt her again, she was aware of that, but deep down she knew it was too late to avoid it. And even if she could have, she needed answers. Diya exhaled and decided to follow where the feeling might go.

It was nice here. Peaceful. There weren't many places that were anymore. So many of his former haunts, where he had spent so much of his life, were all but off-limits to him now. Those where he hadn't burned his bridges were too full of addiction triggers for him to ever properly feel comfortable anymore, to let himself relax. The park was nice, though. Not so much during the day, when there were tourists and families and dog-owners affluent enough to afford a Greenwich address. But at night it was all his. The wall around the park was pretty high, but he'd found a quiet spot where he could just about hop over a couple of weeks back, and since then it had been his sanctuary. He could sit there on the grass for hours, just watching the twinkling lights of the city below him.

Sometimes he never wanted to leave. After all, what was there for him out there? Skag had cost him most of his old friends, and quitting had cost him most of his new ones. The additction Centre had helped him, sure, but he was just a 'client', a number on a spreadsheet tracking thousands of recovering people. Nights like this it felt like he had nobody and nothing except this patch of grass and the distant glow of the city.

'Beautiful, isn't it?'

The voice came from beside him, and was accompanied by a small, breathless laugh. He turned to see a shape sat nearby. In the darkness it was impossible to make out any details of the silhouette, but the air felt very cold. There was silence – not the stillness he was used to, punctuated by distant traffic, but a complete absence of sound, save for the figure's laugh that drifted over to him once again. He hadn't seen this man approaching, hadn't heard anybody sit down. Where had this stranger come from?

'Do I know you?'

'Do you know anyone, anymore?' came the reply. There was something familiar about the voice, about that nasty laughter. The last few times he'd

got high, he'd got paranoid, thinking someone was following him. It couldn't be, though. His pursuer hadn't been real.

'I don't want any trouble,' he said, his voice quiet, almost pleading. 'I'm not bothering anyone.'

'Precisely.'

There was the laughter again. It rippled through him, turning his stomach. He wanted to run, but it felt as though someone had nailed him in place. This was all wrong. He tried to ignore the figure sat next to him. Perhaps it would go away. He looked out at the lights again, though he couldn't really take it in. He was using every ounce of willpower he had to avoid turning to look at what was sat next to him.

There was a small, sharp pain in his arm, and he gasped at the familiar sting of a needle. His head snapped round to see the syringe glinting in the stranger's hands. What was inside it didn't look right. It was dark, far darker than the surrounding gloom of night, a deep horrible darkness. Then the plunger descended and he gagged as it shot into his veins. The junk had always hit him warmly, filling him with a soft happiness like he was full of sunshine. This was not that. It felt icy, like stagnant seawater rushing through him, rotting him from the inside. He tried to take a breath but he couldn't. He staggered to his feet, looking around wildly for something, someone that might help him, but he knew it was too late. It was all through him, and his mouth tasted like ashes as he fell through what might have been a tree or a bush, and lay there on the ground, unmoving.

Tinny music called Diya back to herself. She was shuddering. That had been a particularly nasty one, and she had to take a moment to realise she was still sitting and not laid out on the ground. That she was still alive. She took a few deep breaths, trying to shake the lingering sick feeling that still echoed through her limbs. She looked over at the handset sitting in the pile of bags and equipment nearby, playing its best rendition of *Comfortably Numb*. Why was that so familiar? There was something in her memory, but she couldn't reach it through the hangover and the lingering disorientation. There was no-one else nearby, but the vision was still fading, so Diya took a few more moments to recover and let the phone ring out.

The image of the man stayed with her. All the other times, she had seen a vision of the victim's death (and she now felt pretty confident calling them victims), but they had been strange, surreal, almost impossible. This had

definitely felt much more like a murder. She tried to think it through in more detail, but it was too fresh, and she wasn't sure how much of her nausea was what she had just seen and how much was the lingering hangover. The phone was somehow still blaring out Pink Floyd, cutting through her mind like a jackhammer.

'Frank?' she called. 'Your phone!'

There was no answer. Diya groaned and staggered over to the bags, gingerly picking up the handset. The battered old mobile was years out of date and looked like it had been through the tumble dryer a few times. She found herself smiling at the thought of the proud old Luddite who refused to replace it. Through the cracked screen the word 'WORK' glowed insistently. She looked around one last time for Frank without any luck, then made a decision and pressed the green button.

'Hello, Frank Slough's phone?' she said.

'Oh, hello,' a voice said, freezing her in place. 'You must be Diya. So lovely to finally hear your voice.'

Even if she hadn't heard it in a vision only moments ago, Diya was certain she would have known that voice. It was followed, as she knew it would be, with a thin, breathless laugh. Her hand shook.

'How are you finding the new job?' it continued. 'I do hope you'll stay with us. It can be a very rewarding career. After all, who else do you have?'

Diya's eyes drifted over to the trees, where she could see Xen was teasing Mary as their father chided them both to get back to work. For all her worries and suspicions, they had been there for her when she needed them. She had to trust them.

'Who are you?' Her voice was strained.

'I think you know my name,' Mr Bill replied lightly.

'What do you want?'

'What I'm already getting,' came the answer. 'But I thought maybe it was time we spoke. I know you've heard me before, but it's just not the same, is it?'

'Are you going to kill me?' The words spilled out of her before she could stop them. 'Like you killed the others?'

'That's entirely up to you.' He sounded delighted by the question, 'but I promise that if I do, it will be *nothing* like the others.'

‘I’ll go to the police,’ she said, trying to sound like she believed it would help.

The laughter that erupted from the other end made her feel like throwing up.

‘Oh, I do *like* you, Diya. Frank was absolutely right.’

The phone clicked off, leaving Diya standing there. The morning was mild, but she had never felt so cold in her life. Near the trees, it looked like Frank had noticed her holding his phone and was jogging over.

‘That for me?’ he asked, apparently oblivious to her terror.

Diya shook her head, and passed the handset over to him.

‘Wrong number.’

15

History

It was some time before Diya felt calm enough to think through what she had learned. It had taken all her self-control not to simply turn and flee Greenwich Park the moment Frank had taken the phone, but somehow she had been able to struggle through the last half hour or so of clean-up, barely saying a word to anyone else.

Nobody batted an eyelid when she said she'd make her own way home. After all, she'd done it many times before. They had no idea that it was because Diya suddenly felt deeply unsafe being trapped in a moving vehicle with them. She looked at the three of them as they drove away, and it felt like she was staring at strangers.

The rain started to come down almost as soon as the van was out of sight, and the short journey to the station left her soaked to the skin. There were people there, normal people with drab jobs and a vague sense of urgency and absolutely no idea of what Diya was now certain was lurking in their world. She sat in the carriage, her damp clothing soaking into the fabric of the seat, trying not to think about what was going on. Trying not to remember that laughter.

She made it all the way home, and it was only when she had finally got into the shower, hot water displacing the cold remnants of the rain, that it all crashed down on her. Sliding to the bottom of the bathtub, Diya shook uncontrollably as she felt the full weight of her situation, and the tears came. There was fear there, of course, the pure dread at the thought of what she had unknowingly got herself involved with, but there was also her grief. The bitter, mournful grief at the memory of the life she had lost; the boring, comfortable existence of sitting in front of bad TV with her best friend and

complaining about her tedious job, or next door playing their bass-heavy music too late at night. Her loss of Angie had swelled to encompass everything, until it felt like nothing in her world had survived. At first she had thought Angie's death had done something to her mind, but now it seemed it had cut her off from the world in a way that had put her at a very different sort of risk. There was nowhere she could turn.

The police. Go to the police. Tell them … What? In her head, the image of the bored policeman standing by the trees in Greenwich Park yawned. Even if she could somehow convince them that these deaths were both suspicious and connected (something she had no actual physical evidence for), what were they going to do about it? 'Mr Bill' was clearly an alias, she had no other information on him and she could think of no better description of him than literally 'nondescript'. And did she really think Frank was going to give up more information on him? The absolute best-case scenario was that the Sloughs were patsies who had no idea what was going on, because otherwise …

And beyond all that, Diya simply did not believe the police had the power to protect her. This man, this murderer … There was a part of her that wasn't even sure he was human. And if he was, he wasn't normal.

So that was that. She had accepted that something supernatural was going on with her visions, that there was some weird occult power, and he seemed to be at the centre of it. Maybe he was a wizard? The idea struck her from nowhere and Diya laughed, a staccato manic giggle that shook her whole body.

It was only once she was curled up in her corner of the sofa with a cup of tea that she realised the hangover of the morning still hadn't fully left her. Part of her reflexively wanted to use that as an excuse to dismiss it all, as she had tried to do so often before. She was tired, she was under a lot of stress, she was still processing her loss. She also hadn't eaten anything all day. But no, she wasn't inventing this.

Diya let out a groan. The adrenaline of that morning's events had faded, and the thoughts were now just looping through her brain. Maybe Mr Bill was targeting her, maybe he was coming for her, but she could probably afford to get some dinner before that happened.

The kitchen drawer where she and Angie had always thrown the takeout menus was full to bursting, and there was a warm feeling of normality to

the process of sifting through them, looking for one that caught her eye. There was the slight sound of a creaking floorboard from somewhere in the building. She chose to ignore it, and decided on Korean chicken wings.

The wings were a long time coming, and since she had nothing to do but wait, the fear crept back in, and Diya found herself doing another quick sweep of all the rooms with a kitchen knife in hand. Nothing. The tension was really getting to her.

‘Come on then, you fucker! Let’s get it over with!’ she screamed. The sound disappeared into the unlit hallway, and immediately she felt ridiculous. There was a long moment of silence.

Then, as if in answer, the television sprang into life with an abrupt electrical pop. Diya turned slowly to face it, her heart thumping. On the screen, an advert for toothpaste was playing, a procession of bright, gleaming smiles grinning out at her one after the other. She stood there, waiting for it to be over, but it just kept going, the same beaming faces looping over and over again. He was toying with her. She crept over to the remote control, for some reason trying to do so as quietly as possible, then grabbed it and hit the power button in one smooth motion. The screen went dark and the room was once again silent.

This time it was broken by a clattering from behind her and Diya spun, remote in one hand, kitchen knife in the other, certain in that split second that she was about to die. Behind her, the placid ginger face of Winston regarded her curiously from the sofa, a pile of books splayed out where he had knocked them over.

Diya let out a laugh as all the tension drained from her at once. She put down the knife and reached out to stroke her cat, closing her eyes and for one long breath just feeling his soft fur. Where the terror had been there was now a sadness, as she realised how little she had seen Winston since Angie died. She wasn’t worried about him – he’d always come and gone as he pleased, and she knew he had at least one other family on the road looking after him. They were a pleasant-seeming couple with an adorable little girl of about seven. Winston would make them very happy, she thought, with a mournful smile of her own.

The cat chirrupped happily, then hopped down onto the floor and away out of the cat flap. Diya was oddly certain that she wouldn’t see him again.

It was probably a good thing. After all, if Mr Bill wanted to hurt her, the soppy ginger creature was an obvious target, so maybe it was for the best that he left her as well.

The loneliness struck her hard, all at once, and the only thing that stopped her collapsing under it was that she had to go to the door and collect her dinner.

After eating she phoned her mother. Part of her didn't want to, embarrassed about how long it had been, how little she had to say. But she so desperately wanted to hear another person's voice.

'Hello, Ma.'

'Diya, oh thank goodness, you're alive.' Guilt stabbed her like a needle at the passive aggressive joke. 'Are you OK? We haven't heard from you.'

'Yeah, I'm OK. I'm sorry, I've just been really busy with work.'

'I thought that was it. I was telling your father just the other day, "Diya works too hard," and he agreed.'

'I know, Ma.'

'And I know you're a grown woman now and you need your space and you can't be talking to your parents all the time, of course, you have a lot to do, but when you weren't at Sanjana's baby shower—'

Shit. She'd completely forgotten that was even a thing.

'I'm so sorry,' Diya said. 'I got kinda sick and completely lost track of what day it was.'

'Oh, my darling,' her mother said, not believing her for a second but clearly reassured Diya felt bad enough to make up an excuse. 'That's awful, are you feeling better now?'

'Mostly. I've just been so run-down and I must have picked up a bug from work.'

'Well, you should probably apologise to James and Sanjana, explain what happened. Maybe send an e-card.'

'I will, Ma.' She smiled. She'd never really understood why her mother loved e-cards so much, but the familiar bafflement was reassuring.

'Now, tell me, what have you been up to? We haven't heard from you in so long.'

Diya's eyes fell to the TV in front of her, still black and lifeless. She almost considered telling her mother the truth, just to hear her try to

understand it.

‘Hello? Diya? Are you still there?’

‘Yes, Ma, I’m here,’ she said.

And then she began to lie. About how well she was doing, about what she had been up to. Falsehood after falsehood spilled easily from her lips, building a whole other life for herself. One that her mother would like. It was simple. It was reassuring. But with each little deception she felt herself getting further and further away from the connection she had been so desperate for. By the time she hung up, she felt more alone than ever.

What had she thought? That if she showed Mr Bill there were people in her life who cared about her, that she wasn’t as isolated as all his other victims, he would leave her alone? If anything, she had proved exactly the opposite. Assuming he was, in fact, still watching her.

At this thought she got angry again. That this man, whoever – whatever – he was could just casually destroy her life like this, shatter her peace of mind. She grabbed her laptop and settled down on the sofa. An idea had occurred while telling her mother about the company she was pretending to work for. She typed ‘Slough & Sons’ into the search bar and started to dig.

It was almost two in the morning before Diya found what she was looking for, surrounded by empty mugs, crumpled paper and the box of discarded chicken bones. Diya had always considered herself a comparatively neat person, but that might only have been in comparison to Angie, who had been extremely messy. In fact, when left to her own devices Diya had a tendency towards what her mother called ‘nesting’ – a gradual accumulation of cups, boxes and books on every surface that surrounded her. Usually, whenever she noticed this happening Diya would take a moment to break out of whatever she was doing and tidy up, but tonight she was beyond caring.

Her eyes had been trying to close for the past half hour and the only light in the living room was the glow of her laptop screen. But Diya scanned the ancient newspaper article intently, reaching for her cup of tea, only to realise with a grimace that it had long since gone cold.

Investigating Slough & Sons, its history and operations, had been difficult. Just keeping focus was hard, her gaze always flicking over to the phone, afraid that, late as it was, it was going to ring and summon her to

another job before she was ready. But would she ever be ready? Was there any information she could find that would protect her? Probably not, but the silent phone still loomed in her peripheral vision like a deadline.

It appeared that Frank was registered as a sole trader (Diya knew that she, Xen and Mary were technically paid as contractors), and his father Francis Sr had been likewise. So there was no record of them at Companies House and precious little to be found on any database of UK businesses. It didn't even seem like the name itself was properly registered or trademarked. They were listed in the Yellow Pages and a few online directories with basic information about their services and a number to call for arrangements, but it didn't seem like they even had a proper website of their own. This wasn't a huge surprise; Frank had never shown any particular awareness of or inclination towards the internet, and Diya could vividly imagine the arguments between him and Xen if she tried to talk him into making one. Whatever the reason, it was something of a dead end.

The best Diya had been able to find was that the company seemed to have begun trading in 1920, shortly after the First World War, in the East End of London, somewhere around Mile End. So naturally the next step was to check the records of the time, which she had frankly no idea how to find. Newspapers were the next obvious step, and it seemed like the only local paper for the area in print at the time was the *East London Observer*. It looked more like an advertisement sheet than an actual newspaper but might be the best she could find.

Frustrating as it had been, this sort of digging felt good. The hunt for information, the following of links and connections, made her feel alive again in a weird way. This kind of work had been one of the only bits of her old job that hadn't been soul-crushing. Though back then it had been doing market research, usually for some bullshit tech company, not trying to find some insight that might save her life from a psychic serial killer …

The *East London Observer*. There was something exciting about the idea of hunting through archives full of antique newspapers, poring over yellowed paper or flicking through … what was that stuff called? Microfilm? Microfiche? Diya's mind conjured up images of dark wooden desks and dim reading rooms, far removed from the bright white shelves of the library in Beckton. It was almost a disappointment when it turned out

that the entire run of the publication could be accessed online through the British Newspaper Archives.

The first time she found it was in the edition from 26th June 1920, tucked into a front page bursting with notices for auctioneers and wine merchants:

NIGEL F. SLOUGH
& SONS
CLEARING AFTER BEREAVEMENT
And the entire management of post-mortem
cleaning undertaken
132 Mile End Road, E3
Telephone East 3476

It wasn't a long advertisement, and there seemed to be no further details. Not much to go on. A quick search revealed that the address was now a coffee shop, and the only results for Nigel Slough seemed, unsurprisingly, to be living people named Nigel Slough.

The discovery wasn't exactly enlightening, but she'd already had to buy a subscription to the BNA website to get this far, so she decided she might as well keep flicking through the rest of the 1920 editions of the *East London Observer* they had available. That had been just over three hours ago, and sleep was threatening to overtake her with every click, but she mustn't sleep. Sleep meant it would be tomorrow, and tomorrow meant there might be another job. And she still wasn't ready. She'd seen the advert maybe a dozen times so far over the course of that year's papers. There were never any changes to the wording or look of them, save for the occasional printing error. Her eyes had started to slide off the endless scans of ragged black ink, when a column caught her attention.

It was nestled on page two, where the adverts gave way to a series of short articles that were halfway between news stories and editorials. It was tucked between a lengthy ramble criticising the 'cold morbid hand of government' mishandling the management of the railways, and an outraged report on the closure of a local church.

THE PROFITS OF DEATH

> It is perhaps the most scurrilous business that can be imagined by thinking peoples to make one's money from another's unseemly demise. And yet today, when the scourge of suicide rampages through our streets, there is to be observed a new form of carrion feeder plying his trade. Families racked with dismay and grief are sought after by one N. F. Slough, whose advertisements in this very paper will be all too familiar to readers. The service that he claims is 'cleaning' in a time of deepest shame and unhappiness, to remove all traces of a once-beloved relative taken too soon. The undertaker and the vicar may deal in death and the hereafter, and they do it with all the solemnity and respect that such a sombre occasion may warrant. Yet the peddler of this new service approaches his own undertaking with neither dignity nor introspection, being observed to make enquiries after the nature of the deaths and actively seeking out those who have broken the laws of God and government by taking their own life. More egregious still, his partner, a man whose name is given only as William, is observed to make a merry mockery of the deceased, laughing at their misfortune as though such tragedies were the lightest of jests. Many who have been served by this man go so far as to declare that the dead were not known to them, and that they bear no recognition of those supposedly removed, which marks the purveyors with the distinctive stripe of fraud. It may be stated in the strongest of terms that if such is the measure of those who would clear away the dead, a family is better served tending to their own, and it is most distasteful to see the coffers of Slough & Sons swell as though the grim business of the mortuary were a great harvest of their crop.

Diya read and reread the words, trying to decode the infuriating prose. What was clear enough was that almost a century before Diya had ever heard of him or his descendants, Nigel Slough had worked with a laughing man named William. Bill.

She tried to choke down the shivers that passed over her and think it through rationally. There were two possibilities here. One, that the person she had talked to was not the first Mr Bill, that these killings were a family business as much as the Sloughs cleaning up after them. And the second was that Mr Bill was very, very old. Neither made sense, and Diya wanted to think that she was only entertaining the idea of an ageless murderer because of how tired she was, but given everything else she had seen, could she really discount it?

The third possibility, of course, was that William was a very common name and it was simply a mundane coincidence, but somehow that felt like the most absurd idea of all.

There was no way she could run from this. Mr Bill had killed many, many people, she was certain of that. She was pretty sure he'd got into her home before, and probably could again. Would quitting the job help?

It didn't help George.

Could she fight back, somehow? Was that what the visions were? The dead reaching out to her, begging for someone to avenge them? It had never felt like that, though. It always felt like she was *being* them, not contacting them. And even if that was the case, what could she do?

Outside, far down the street, somebody laughed. For a second adrenaline flooded Diya's system and her eyes shot open. Then it came again, clearer now, the raucous drunken laugh of someone who had not paid attention to pub closing times. She tried to relax, to tell herself that she was safe, but she knew it was a lie. She started to shake again, ever so slightly, and was still shaking when sleep overtook her.

The rain still hadn't let up when Diya stepped off the Overground at Clapham High Street. She pulled her hood up and thrust her hands into her pockets, instinctively trying to make herself smaller as she made her way through the sporadic crowds. Her eyes were focused on the pavement in front of her, avoiding the faces of the people she passed. She couldn't risk seeing that smile. The pattering of rain on her hood drowned out the noise of the city around her, and she tried to find a peace in it, as she had before. But instead she felt vulnerable, acutely aware of any sound lurking beyond the rain that might be laughter.

That morning, as she tried to choke down a bowl of porridge, Diya had come to a decision. She was going to talk to Xen and Mary. The idea of them being somehow involved in all of this made her feel sick, but she couldn't handle not knowing for sure. If they didn't realise what was going on, maybe they might be able to help her. If they did, then she was as good as dead already …

No. She couldn't let herself think like that.

Or they might just think she was delusional. That was also a distinct possibility. By this point, Diya had experienced enough that there was no longer any doubt in her mind about the reality of what was going on, but they had seen little of it. Mary had proved herself more than open-minded, but this might be a step too far. And as for Xen …

It didn't matter, she had to talk to them about it, and whatever they said or did after that, there was nothing to be done about it. But first there was something she had to check. A suspicion that had been building inside her

ever since she had begun to put the pieces together. She didn't know what it might mean, but it was important to her to know if it was true.

Cottage Grove looked very different in the daylight – at least what daylight was able to penetrate through the thick cloud cover. There were no crowds now, no flashing lights or tape marking off the ruins of the flats at the end of the road. The remnants were still there, though, looming like a broken tooth. Caved in on itself like something hollow and rotten. Whoever was responsible for properly dealing with the site, they hadn't done so yet. How long had it been now? A month? Two? Time seemed so strange to Diya. She stood there, watching rivulets of rainwater cascade down the rubble, flowing out of the hollow doorway and down the gutter into the drain.

Watching the quiet, rain-slicked ruin, Diya tried to remember, to bring to mind how it felt to scrabble through the tunnels under the earth, to feel it all come crashing down on top of her. But it was gone. Not even the faint lingering of a dream. She remembered having seen it, she knew she had been afraid, but the actual emotions, the vision itself, seemed so distant now.

She took a moment and tried to listen, opening herself up, begging to be contacted. But if there were ghosts here then they were as silent as ever. The dread she felt now was not a second-hand echo, but a keen and present threat. Had she been foolish to come out in the open on her own?

Turning away, she scanned the surrounding streets and houses for the person she had come in search of, but there was no sign of the old man. Had he said where he lived? No, of course he hadn't, who would simply volunteer that information to a stranger responding to a crisis? She had hoped his comments about watching over the neighbourhood might have meant he'd be out and about, but that possibility had been firmly dashed by the rain.

Diya sighed and silently swore at herself for wasting her time. Had she really believed she'd just bump into him? She knew what she was really doing. She was putting off the conversations that she didn't want to have, grasping any avenue of investigation that felt safer than what she needed to do. She should just give Xen and Mary a call and ask them to meet her. 'We need to talk'. A bitter smirk crept to her lips. 'I'm breaking up with your

dad’s business because he gets his jobs from an immortal serial killer.’ Yeah, that’s what she needed to do.

But she didn’t. Instead, she made a slow circuit of the estate. Diya told herself she was still keeping an eye out for the old man, but after a couple of loops her eyes started to unfocus and she lost herself to the feeling of moving forward. Round and round she went, not going anywhere but unwilling to stand still or turn around. The waterproofing on her coat had failed some time ago and she could feel the icy water, but she couldn’t find it within herself to stop.

And then there he was, wiping down a white metal patio chair that sat just under the overhang of the floor above. A mug of something hot steamed in his hand as he sat down and stared out into the rain, an expression of serene contemplation on his face.

Now that he was here, Diya was overcome with a sudden reluctance to actually talk to him. The question she had for him was odd, and there was a horrible worry that when she opened her mouth it might all come tumbling out.

‘Can I help you?’ His deep brown eyes twinkled slightly as he called to her. There was no hostility or suspicion in his tone, just a genuine curiosity.

‘Yeah,’ Diya said. ‘Maybe you can.’

‘Come on, then,’ he said, waving her closer. ‘It’s nasty weather today.’

‘I actually kind of like it,’ she said, joining him beneath the overhang.

‘Me too.’ The old man grinned. ‘But I thought it might be the wrong thing to say to someone who looks just about drowned.’

She pulled back her hood. Her new friend’s face twisted into an expression of surprise.

‘I know you,’ he said. ‘From the cleaners.’ He gestured to the collapsed flats.

Diya nodded, still wondering if she should leave.

‘Lloyd,’ the old man said, holding out his hand.

‘Diya,’ she replied, shaking it before realising how wet her hand was. He didn’t seem to notice, and his eyes drifted back over to the wreckage.

‘Nasty business. I’m just glad no-one was hurt.’

Diya’s stomach lurched. There it was.

‘That’s, uh, that’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about,’ Diya said slowly. ‘The thing is … someone *was* hurt. A man died.’

‘What? No.’ Lloyd shook his head. ‘Those flats were unoccupied, have been for over a year. I’m sure of it. Anyway, they’d have said something if anyone had been killed. It would have been in all the papers.’

He was right. And she had checked, there was no mention of the man who died in any of the news reports on the collapse. None of the Mr Bill jobs had made it into any newspapers.

‘Yeah, I guess that’s, uh, that’s what I wanted to check. You don’t remember the man who lived there? He was a recluse, an agoraphobe. We talked about it a bit, when I came that night to do the clean-up.’

‘I don’t remember much of that night, to be honest. It was quite late. Past my bedtime,’ Lloyd said with a playful smile that tried to hide his clear unease.

‘You’re certain?’

His face became pensive.

‘You say he was agoraphobic? So … scared to go outside?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I suppose that’s why I wouldn’t have known him, but …’

‘You have no memory of him at all?’ She was pressing him now, and he frowned, as though his walls had come up.

‘I’m afraid not.’

‘You’re certain?’ Diya said. She didn’t want Lloyd to see how desperate she was, but she couldn’t just walk away. ‘Really think about it. Please.’

He was clearly confused, but his brow furrowed with effort, searching his mind. For a second a sharp discomfort, almost pain, flashed in his eyes. Then it was gone and Lloyd shook his head.

Diya sighed and nodded to herself. She’d been right.

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t be more help.’ His voice was slightly shaky and Diya felt a stab of guilt that she had pushed him like that.

‘No, Lloyd. You’ve actually been a great help.’

Even if Diya didn’t like the answer.

On the way home, a thought occurred, causing Diya to pull out her phone and quickly tap a name into the search bar. The obituary she was looking for wasn’t difficult to find, having been given a prominent position in both the *Telegraph* and the *Times*. The name Susanna Parish was still very much present in the world.

She could imagine the funeral in such vivid detail. The crowds outside the majestic church, each attendee dressed immaculately, in deep sombre black suits, tastefully beautiful dresses and hats that would have cost more than Diya's entire wardrobe. They would have stood there, having hushed conversations, careful to keep their faces respectful and ensure they were the requisite level of devastated. Old friends would be seeing each other for an event that sat comfortably into their schedules, coming together for an occasion that, solemn as it may have been, was still very much an *occasion*. Maybe there were a few photographers milling around, snapping the occasional picture of attendees who were considerate enough to look more heartbroken than ever when a paparazzo came close.

Nobody was going to forget Susanna Parish. It didn't matter if anybody had actually liked the woman, or if her time on this earth had been a help or comfort to anyone. What mattered was that she was a solid link in the great chain that ran through the country, and her name was going to exist in genealogies and family histories for centuries to come. Mr Bill and his kind (were there others like him?) couldn't touch her.

Why didn't she feel angry? Why wasn't there a burning rage inside her at the grotesque unfairness of it all? She wanted to feel it, but the only thing she felt was cold.

16

The Trelawney Estate Job

Her phone sat there on the table next to her, solid and dark, waiting for her to find a backbone and call Xen and Mary. But instead, she simply stood in front of her wardrobe, pretending she was wondering what to wear. Diya finally picked the phone up. Her reflection stared back at her from the dark glass, disrupted only by a slight smear where her finger had recently touched it. She was just about to put it down again when it leapt to life in her hand, vibrating excitedly and displaying a picture of Xen. For a moment, it seemed as though the image was smirking at her, mocking her, but it was just a crack in the screen she hadn't noticed before.

Diya answered the phone, knowing that she was out of time, and that at the other end of this call was a job for Mr Bill.

'Hey Diya, we've got a job.' Xen didn't exactly sound thrilled about it either.

'Oh,' was all Diya could think to say. 'OK.'

'You free?'

Of course, that was the thing, wasn't it? Technically Diya could refuse any of these. She didn't need to give a reason or feign sickness or anything like that. She could just say she wasn't going to do this one. She still had money enough for the moment. But if she turned down one, would they call her for another? And maybe doing these jobs was part of Mr Bill's game, toying with her before going in for the kill. If that was the case, would a refusal be his sign that playtime was over? What was it he had said on the phone? That it was up to Diya whether or not he killed her?

'Hello? You still there?' Xen said, and Diya realised she'd not actually said anything.

‘Yeah, I can be there,’ she replied, regretting it almost immediately. ‘Do we have any details? Where is it?’

‘Hackney. One of the tower blocks on the Trelawney Estate. Apparently someone fell from the tenth floor and it’s a real mess. You want us to pick you up?’

‘No, I’ll make my own way over there.’

‘You sure? I think you’re on our way.’

A shudder passed through Diya at the idea of being trapped in that van for the journey.

‘I’m not at home at the moment. I’ll meet you there as soon as I can.’

‘Gotcha,’ Xen said, the brightness in her voice jarring.

‘Oh, hey, Xen,’ she said before the call could be ended, nervousness spilling out of her voice in a way she hoped wouldn’t be picked up.

‘What’s up?’

‘Is this one of those jobs from, uh, what did you say his name was? Bill?’

‘Mr Bill? Urgh, I hope not. Fucker gives me the creeps. Maybe, though. Dad doesn’t usually tell us. He knows we don’t like the guy. Why?’

‘How come he keeps accepting his jobs, then?’

‘Hm, gee Diya, I dunno. Why would a business owner accept well-paid work from a customer? Guess it’ll just have to remain a mystery.’

‘OK, I get it. You don’t need to be an asshole.’

‘Sorry.’ Xen sounded genuinely apologetic. ‘Guess I’m just salty ’cause I feel like I’ve had this same conversation with my dad, y’know?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Anyway, I gotta go get ready. Trelawney Estate, near Hackney Central. Give me a buzz when you get there.’

‘Sure thing.’

And the phone was silent again. Diya resisted the urge to hurl it across the room. Xen might not know whether this was a Mr Bill job, but she was absolutely certain it was.

The tower blocks of the estate loomed over the smaller buildings below it, an eclectic mix of old brick terraces and decaying sixties architecture. The tall structures were broken up by patches of over-trodden grass and, opposite, a Tesco supermarket car park, lending the whole area a sense of

dull urban bleakness very much at odds with the bright sunshine that fell upon it from a clear blue sky. It was a lovely day, although the time of year meant that a distinct chill accompanied the lack of cloud cover. Diya had been struggling with her coat the whole journey over, too hot to wear it when in the direct sun, but too cold to take it off in any sort of shade. It was such a mundane problem but she'd found herself almost obsessing over it on the bus. As if she were starved for things to worry about right now.

Speaking of which, there was a figure in Tyvek coveralls pressure-washing the path in front of one of the blocks – Mary, perhaps? Hard to tell from this distance. Her thoughts refocused on the situation with a deep, sinking feeling. Tape had been stretched around a large area of the ground between the buildings, although it had been stepped over so much that the middle section of it trailed in the mud. Diya stepped over it in turn and headed towards probably-Mary, trying not to let her bubbling panic show. Everything felt like it was out of control. While she had been scanning through a century-old newspaper, Mr Bill had claimed another victim.

It was indeed Mary, who returned the greeting and said something Diya couldn't hear over the pressure washer. The water turned off abruptly.

'—there, OK?' Mary finished.

'Sorry, I didn't …' Diya gestured to her ears and shrugged.

'Oh, right, sorry. I said the others are on the tenth floor.'

'Yeah, I know. I texted Xen and she filled me in.'

'Right, well, tell my dad I'll be another twenty minutes here. Maybe a half hour.'

'Sure.'

'Are you all right?'

The question caught Diya off-guard. Beneath her eye protection, Mary was looking at her with a concerned intensity.

'Not really,' Diya said at last. 'I've just been having a bad few days. Stuck in my own head.'

'About …?' Mary trailed off meaningfully.

'A bit.' Diya nodded, not seeing any reason to hide it.

'I'm sorry.' She sounded genuinely apologetic. 'It was a lot to lay on you all at once. I should have thought.'

'No, it's not just the George stuff. There's, uh … There's a lot going on.'

‘Yeah, I get it.’ Mary nodded sympathetically, then leaned in closer. ‘Have you had any more … You know, visions?’

‘I …’ Suspicion surfaced in Diya’s chest, making Mary’s concern seem suddenly sinister. ‘We’ll talk later. OK?’

‘OK. Just remember, I’m here if you need me.’

‘I know. Thanks, Mary.’

‘See you up there!’

And with that the water resumed and any further words were lost under the noise of the pressure washer. Diya thought she could feel Mary’s eyes following her as she moved away.

Shit, in all her investigation she’d almost forgotten about George. Talking with Xen and Mary wasn’t just going to be a matter of telling them about Mr Bill. She was going to have to tell them she thought he’d killed their brother. And that their dad was maybe complicit. How the hell was she going to have that conversation?

Nobody had mentioned anything about getting through the locked front door of the building, and Diya paused for a second. The sudden idea that the door was locked and she simply couldn’t get in gave her a second of self-indulgent hope. Whoops, guess she’d just have to give this one a miss. Sorry, Mr Bill, the door was locked, you know? Then it swung open and a dour-looking teenager skulked out of the entrance. Diya grimaced and caught the door just as it was closing.

‘Thanks,’ she mumbled to the young man, who held up a middle finger over his shoulder and didn’t turn around. Charming.

The entrance to the tower block had a smell that almost reminded her of her old school somehow. Vinyl flooring scuffed with the muddy shoes of hundreds of passing feet and paper piled up in each apartment’s mailbox (some of which seemed distinctly more neglected than others). There were two lifts, one that apparently serviced the odd floors, and another for the even ones. She hit the button for the latter and waited. And waited. After what felt like five minutes the digital readout began to tick down slowly. There was a dull tapping sound that after a moment Diya realised was her own foot. The space here was making her oddly nervous. Something about the angles and that air of liminality made her feel even more vulnerable, though to what she couldn’t really say.

There was no reassuring *ding* when the lift arrived, just the doors grumbling open, releasing the scent that all tower block lifts seem to share, which might have been old urine, or might have been the ammonia-based products they used to clean the old urine. Diya let out a small judgemental breath, realising with a little bit of genuine pride that she'd done enough of this work now that she probably could have got the smell out pretty easily. Still, that wasn't really an option, so she simply stepped inside, pressed the button for the tenth floor and tried to take shallow breaths. The lift was so slow that she could only tell it was moving by the occasional change of the numbers above the buttons.

The doors opened onto a hallway almost identical to the one on the ground floor, but the door outside led to a balcony walkway, which allowed access to two of the flats. Through the small window she could see Frank standing in front of one of the No Smoking signs, puffing away on his pipe and indulging in his favourite hobby: talking to yet another disinterested policeman. Was he trying to make sure no-one got suspicious? No, why would anyone outside of this be suspicious? Besides, she'd heard the sort of conversations he had with them and she was pretty sure Frank Slough had no interest in saying one word more than absolutely necessary. She pushed open the door slowly, not wanting to interrupt them. She wasn't trying to eavesdrop, of course, but she wasn't exactly going to cover her ears.

'—other asylum seekers, but I guess she just got lucky,' the cop was saying.

'Can't have been that lucky,' Frank observed, his eyes flicking down to the ground far below the balcony. He took a thoughtful drag on his pipe. 'Only thing I can't figure is why she went out the window, rather than just over the side here.'

'Yeah, I asked one of the detectives the same thing when I came on the scene. She didn't even open the window first. You know what he said?'

'What?'

'He said, "Who the fuck knows why these people do anything?"'

'Inspiring,' Frank said flatly. His eyes flicked up and he saw Diya standing in the door. He waved a greeting. The cop turned and looked slightly sheepish.

'Anyway,' he said to Frank, 'I best get back to it. You good here?'

'Should be.'

And the police officer turned and headed back past Diya, giving her a curt nod as he did so.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ Diya said.

‘You’re not. Only just getting started. Come on.’

And with that they headed into the flat. To most people it would have looked like just a slightly grimy flat in a state of disrepair, but to Diya’s eye it was the most curious combination of spotless and filthy. It was clear that everything which could be done with just soap and effort was almost immaculate, cared for, but anything that would take more specialist products or equipment was in awful condition: the grouting around any tiles was shot through with mould, many of the walls had patches of damp, and the wallpaper was yellowed with age and torn in places. The furniture was also in a pretty shocking state; all of it looked like someone had set the IKEA webpage at ‘low price – high price’ and bought the first results. Beyond that, there was almost nothing to be seen in the place at all. No books, no personal effects. Stepping through the door Diya was reminded of the first time she and Angie had stepped into their home, silent and empty and waiting.

‘Did they take the stuff away already or …’

‘Wasn’t really anything here,’ Frank told her. ‘Woman who lived here only moved in about a month ago, they said. Came from a Home Office facility, assigned this place. Guess she didn’t have much with her.’

Diya wondered for a moment what people would say about her when they found her body. Would Mr Bill do that one as a suicide too? *Probably the grief. Yeah, I think they were lovers, and you know how that sort are. Couldn’t go on. Ah, well, probably have to throw out this couch.* Or maybe something more dramatic like a house fire. *Probably an electrical thing. Smoke got her before the flames did. Cluttered house like that, what can you expect. Can probably salvage the other bedroom.* She shook her head and turned her attention back to Frank.

‘Did we get this job from the Home Office?’ Diya couldn’t fully disguise the disgust in her voice.

‘No,’ Frank said.

‘Mr Bill, then?’ she asked, not even trying to sound casual.

Franks’ eyes flicked over to her for a second with a hint of surprise and there was a moment of tense silence. Then he cocked his head to one side in

a gesture of affirmation. Diya didn't follow up the question.

'It was suicide. The police say.'

'I heard.' Diya pushed past him into the living room, where Xen was crouched next to a shattered window, carefully sweeping shards of bloodstained broken glass with a dustpan and brush.

'I asked him the same thing,' she said, giving Diya a meaningful look. Frank bristled.

'And I told you that we don't get to choose the jobs we like. That's not what we're here to do. I'm sorry if it's not what you want to be doing with your Saturday, but here we are.'

'It would just be nice if you treated a dead human being with a little bit of respect,' Xen shot back.

'What happened to "fuck the dead"?' Frank answered, refusing to be riled. 'Seem to recall you saying something like that to Mary more than once.'

Xen tried to respond, but faltered, looking over to Diya for back-up, but Diya was still reeling from the realisation that it was apparently Saturday. When had that happened? The days just blended together so much at the moment that it was kind of disorientating.

'Fine,' Frank said at last. 'I'm sad someone died, but it's still our job to get rid of anything they left behind. Diya, you OK to cover the kitchen?'

'Uh, yeah.' She nodded. 'Is the bathroom OK for me to suit up in?'

'Should be.'

Xen made a small noise of irritation and returned to dealing with the glass. Diya grabbed some coveralls from the small pile of supplies in the entrance hall and headed into the cramped bathroom to put them on. It looked like the others had already been through here, and there was nothing left that would indicate anybody had ever lived there. There was a cracked mirror over the sink. It was jarring to see how normal she still looked, a strange dissonance with how she felt. She let out a deep sigh. She wasn't going to be able to talk to Xen or Mary with Frank there, especially given how tense things seemed to be at the moment. They all just needed to get through it, then they could go for a drink or something and hash it out. There wasn't even going to be much talking to do here, except …

Except have a horrifying vision, she thought. This was a Mr Bill job, and by now she knew what that probably meant for her. She tensed, as though it

was going to be creeping up behind her like a cinematic slasher. Best to just try to forget it, let it catch her by surprise. Dwelling on it wasn't going to stop it from happening.

'Diya? You all right in there?' Frank was outside the door.

'Uh-huh.' She hadn't realised how long she'd been staring at her own face. 'One second.'

She emerged warily, but Frank had already moved on, so she grabbed what she needed and headed into the kitchen.

Cleaning out the fridge usually felt weirdly therapeutic to Diya. In one of the more mundane jobs early on she had drained and rinsed out recyclables for separation, but Frank had told her not to as it just took too much time. So now everything was just thrown away, heavy jars of old pickle water, yogurt pots starting to turn, huge courgettes going soft in the middle, all of it vanishing. It always felt cleansing in a way that scrubbing away at the gaps under kitchen counters never did. There wasn't much of that feeling for Diya in this kitchen, however, as the fridge was both well-ordered and minimally stocked. Still, away it all went, and soon she was scrubbing at the interior of the ancient appliance that looked pretty clean already. The woman who lived here had clearly been quite fastidious.

The next half hour passed quickly. Superfluous as it may have been, the rhythmic motions of cleaning and now-familiar smells did serve to calm her down. By the time she moved on to a cupboard, she had almost forgotten about what was still waiting for her. Then she saw what was inside. Half a dozen drinking glasses of varying sizes and shapes, all clouded with age and chipped from careless use. She'd expected those, they were on the inventory. What she hadn't expected was a large, plastic drinking cup. It was one of those colourful collectors' cups, the sort you sometimes get in cinemas when they have a big movie release. It bore a logo for *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. It seemed so utterly incongruous that Diya could only stare, and she knew even as she reached for it that this was the thing that would bring her into the last moments of this poor woman. Had she been searching for it? The vision? It didn't matter. She'd found it now.

She took the plastic cup down and went over the sink. She was always thirsty these days. Something about the heating in this flat always left her throat feeling like sandpaper. Or maybe it was just that she wasn't used to how hard the water was here yet, so she wasn't actually drinking enough.

Either way, there was only one solution. The cup filled up quickly; the water pressure in this place was one of the few things that actually worked well. The cup made her smile. It always did. It had felt a little bit silly to bring it home with her after the film, but she didn't like to use the ones that had already been here, not since she cut her lip on a chipped glass. Eventually she'd buy some new ones of her own, but it was hard enough living on basically nothing, and she had to prioritise.

It certainly wasn't enough money to be going to the movies. She couldn't believe how expensive it was here. But she was never going to have missed this one. She'd loved *Star Wars* ever since her father had shown her an old VHS of the original when she was a child. This was the first of the newer ones she'd seen without subtitles, and she'd been surprised how easy it had been to understand. Although, the woman who played Rey was so beautiful that it wouldn't have mattered to her if the whole thing had been silent.

There was a knock at the door, and her smile vanished. She put the cup down slowly. There had been no obnoxious chiming of the intercom, which meant that either someone had followed a resident in (not unheard of) or …

She hurried quietly to the front door, being careful to avoid making too much noise that might be heard from outside, and put her eye up to the peephole. Not again.

A face smiled back at her from the other side. It was him. Flanked either side by a half-dozen blank-faced men in suits. Her legs felt weak and her heart beat quickly. The stump where her little finger had been ached. They knocked again.

Just be quiet. Just stay still and wait. They can't be sure that you're at home. They'll have to go away eventually. She tried to keep her breathing steady and quiet, but the blood roaring through her head made it hard to hear anything else. How long had she been crouched here? They must be gone by now.

The front door opened. There was no handle on the outside, only the keyhole which undid the latch. There had been no sound of keys or unlocking, but still it swung inexorably inwards. She wanted to turn and run, but there was nowhere to go in the tiny flat, and her muscles no longer seemed to be functioning.

The door was open and in they filed. The man with all the questions watched, that horrible smile still plastered over his face, as the men in suits picked her up by the arms. Their heads didn't look quite right, as though they'd each glued a printout of someone else over their own face. They all wore what at first looked like official ID badges pinned to their lapels, but the writing and pictures were smeared and unreadable, like they had started to melt. Their fingers were thin and spidery as they dragged her towards the living room, and sharp enough that she felt blood trickle down the inside of her shirt.

They placed her in the uncomfortable dining chair as the smiling man paced slowly around the room. She had seen this dance before and knew what was coming next. He asked questions. At least, they sounded like questions. The pacing and intonation, the sounds themselves, they felt like English, but they didn't fit together into anything she could recognise as words, and the old panic came over her again. Each sentence ended in an inflection that made it clear that it was a question, though she had no idea what she was actually being asked.

So she said yes. Or no. Or her name or her case number or anything that sounded like it might be an answer. Sometimes he laughed, which might have meant she got it right. Other times he simply nodded to his associates, which definitely meant she had got it wrong. When she got it wrong they took another bit of her. Some of her hair. A tooth. Another finger. Of course it hurt, but any time she screamed or cried or made any sort of noise they shook their strange heads and tutted to each other as though she was being deeply unreasonable.

This had happened before, more than once. But this time felt different. This time it didn't seem like she could simply wait it out until they went away. It was building to something, the questions getting longer and more intense in tone, despite still being almost-recognisable gibberish. After half an hour he was screaming in her face, but still his smile never wavered.

At last, she could take it no more. Leaping up from the chair she swore at the man in Shona and turned, making a run for the door. She didn't even make it to the hallway. He laughed as he dragged her to the window, as though she had got one of the questions right. What was he doing? The window was still closed, he couldn't … A hundred faces flashed through

her mind in an instant. Old friends, family, all gone now. And then she hit the glass and was gone too.

Diya closed the cupboard door. She was shaking. Had that been worse than the last one? They faded so completely afterwards it was difficult to compare. But she could feel a slight trickle of blood down her back, under her overalls, where she knew it had been cut on a piece of glass. She stepped out onto the walkway, lowering her mask and taking in the fresh air. There was the faintest memory still of that same air rushing against her as she fell, but she got no vertigo as she looked down at the ground far below. London stretched away in the distance, the bright sun illuminating the distinct miasma of dust and fumes that surrounded the centre of the city. It looked sick.

‘You OK?’ Xen’s voice came from the doorway behind her.

‘No.’ She didn’t have the energy to pretend otherwise.

‘Oh,’ there was a pause as Xen struggled to come up with the right response. ‘Shit.’

‘How much longer will it be?’

‘What, work? I dunno, an hour or so. Probably less now Mary’s here. Why?’

‘Let’s go for a drink. All three of us.’

‘Sure. Honestly, I’d kill for a pint.’ Xen nodded, watching her carefully. ‘You don’t look exactly jazzed at the thought, though.’

‘We need to talk through some stuff.’

‘What stuff?’

Diya looked at her friend.

‘It’s complicated.’

‘Nope, fuck off, you can’t do that,’ Xen said. ‘You can’t be like “we need a serious talk” and then just expect me to go back to work like I’m not going to be panicking.’

‘Fine. It’s about … Mr Bill.’

Xen looked at Diya for a long moment.

‘You know something about that creep?’ she asked at last.

Diya nodded.

‘OK. I’ll let Mary know.’

17

Confrontation

‘A serial killer?’ Xen said again. She sounded exactly as disbelieving as Diya had worried she would be. Mary hadn’t said anything for several minutes.

‘Sort of? I don’t know if that’s the right term. Some of those deaths would have been hard to do naturally.’

‘Which is OK, because according to you he can also do magic,’ Xen said with a snort.

‘I don’t know. Yes? I mean, magic makes it sound like they’re being killed by Merlin or something.’

‘Or David Copperfield.’ Xen had no interest in being helpful.

‘But he has some kind of weird power, yeah. Psychic, maybe, with the visions and everything. I mean, you said yourself he was creepy.’

‘Yeah, and a person can be creepy without being a serial killer wizard.’

‘Mary, you believe me, right?’

‘Uh …’ Mary looked unhappy to be put on the spot. ‘Maybe, yeah. About some of it.’

‘Mmhm.’ Xen raised an eyebrow. ‘Let me guess. You believe Diya about the insane visions and magic, but not about the actually possible serial killer bit?’

Mary’s eyes lowered in embarrassment.

‘You say he killed George.’ Her voice was barely a whisper.

‘I don’t know for sure, but I think—’

‘No. Uh-uh.’ Xen shook her head violently. ‘What happened with George was an accident. Just an accident. He wasn’t murdered, and we sure as hell haven’t been taking money from his fucking murderer! No!’

Xen looked around, realising her raised voice was attracting some curious looks.

‘I can’t accept that,’ she continued, quieter. ‘I just can’t.’

‘She might be right.’ Mary’s voice was still low.

‘Oh, big surprise Mary’s on board with a—’ Xen took a breath and settled herself. ‘Look, Diya, you’ve been through a lot, and that can have an effect on—’

‘What, you don’t think I’ve considered the possibility that I’m seeing things? I mean, I *am* seeing things, but in the hallucination sense. Of course I’ve considered it. But this stuff has … it’s real.’

Diya pulled down the collar of her T-shirt to show the fresh cut on her back. She’d checked it in the mirror earlier. It was a vivid red slash. Xen hissed in sympathy.

‘What happened?’

‘I got cut by the window glass at the Trelawny Estate.’

‘What?’ Xen pursed her lips in confusion. ‘You didn’t come anywhere near the window.’

‘But the woman who was thrown through it did.’

There was a pause.

‘There are a lot of things that can cut you.’

‘For fuck’s sake, Xen!’

‘For fuck’s sake what? You want to dump all this on me? About my job? About my dad? About my dead fucking brother, and you just want me to swallow it all down and smile?’

‘George got marks too, Xen. Diya’s …’ Mary ventured, but her sister’s venomous look shut her down.

Diya sat there. They were just across a table from each other, but the gulf between them felt impossibly wide. She glanced at Mary, but her face was as hard to read as ever.

‘Do you remember any of the people we cleaned up for Mr Bill?’ she asked, trying a different tack.

‘Of course,’ Xen said defiantly. ‘I remember everyone we do.’

The certainty in her voice threw Diya off for a second.

‘She takes souvenirs,’ Mary said with a hint of disapproval.

Xen looked at her sister in surprise. ‘You knew?’

‘You’re not as subtle about it as you think. You hide it from Dad, but I always notice.’

‘OK, fine, yeah. It’s not creepy or anything, I just … I just don’t want them to disappear completely. It feels wrong.’

There was a sadness in Xen’s eyes now, something Diya would never have expected to see under her friend’s deliberately cavalier attitude towards the dead.

‘Do you remember their names?’ Diya pushed.

‘Yeah, sure,’ Xen said, but there was a wavering in her voice.

‘Tell me, then. Any of them. The woman from the tower block, or the hoarding woman at Crayford Road?’

‘I—’

‘What about the guy who died outside The White Lion? We all saw the library card with his name on it. Do you remember any of the actual details about any of these people?’

There was a long pause.

‘You don’t think that’s weird?’ She could see the doubt forming on Xen’s face. She was certain now the two of them didn’t know, but she needed them to believe her. If she was on Mr Bill’s list, she needed them on her side. ‘None of the papers ever mention them, either. The reports on that collapsed house said nobody was hurt.’

That one landed.

Xen exhaled. ‘Fine. I’ll admit it’s kind of weird. Kind of really weird. But it’s a big jump from that to the idea they’re being erased from existence by a murderer.’

‘What about George?’

‘What about him?’ Xen bristled again.

‘He had friends, right?’ Diya looked to Mary, hoping for some back-up, but her friend’s eyes were fixed on the table.

‘Yeah, loads of them.’

‘You seen any of them since he died?’

‘Not really,’ Xen admitted. ‘Well, there was one guy, Lee, I bumped into him outside Co-Op a few months back, but …’

Diya decided to make a big swing. ‘… But it seemed like he didn’t really remember him at all?’

Xen looked troubled, but didn’t answer.

‘Look …’ Diya sighed. ‘Just think about it, OK? I don’t need you to fully buy into everything. But I can’t keep all this stuff to myself anymore. And I think … He’s watching me. I need your help, and I needed to be sure you weren’t …’

‘What? In cahoots with Mr Bill?’ Xen shook her head. ‘No. Fuck no. If you’re even, like twenty per cent on the money with this, we’re with you.’

‘Thank you. I’m just terrified, you know? Your dad—’

A choking sound came from Mary, who had been quiet for some time, and as Diya turned she saw tears flowing silently down her cheeks.

‘Oh, Mary, I—’

‘I’m sorry, Diya. I know, I was the one who told you about … But I just can’t … This is our family you’re talking about here. Our dad. If you’re right about George, and he knew, and … I can’t accept it. I just …’

Her voice failed her then. She got up from the table, mumbled some apologies and hurried out the door.

‘Shit, I’m sorry.’ Diya felt awful.

‘No, it’s OK,’ Xen said, her own voice tight. ‘Can’t say I’m feeling all that different myself. Look, I’ll talk to her and I’ll drop you a line later, OK? I think we just need some time.’

Then she got up and left, turning down the street after Mary. Diya sat there and finished her drink, unsure how much more time she had.

The next three days were bad. Diya found herself jumping at every noise, triple-checking every window and lock in her house. Three times she had found the window open, once the front door had mysteriously become unlocked, and on the second night she had noticed a smiley face drawn in the grime on an (abandoned?) car parked opposite. She shuddered as she imagined those awful fingers drawing in the oily dust. He was toying with her, of that she had no doubt, but how would she know if he decided to actually come for her? Would there even be any warning?

And she still hadn’t heard anything from her friends. No missed calls, no voicemails, her texts left unread. Diya shouldn’t really have been surprised, she told herself, but there was still a feeling of betrayal there, a sense that she had opened herself up to them and been rejected. She checked her messages again.

Could you call me? she typed, and her finger hovered over the send button. Above it, her previous two messages to Xen, *How did it go?* and *Everything all right?* sat mocking her. She deleted it.

Obviously they were going through a lot. Maybe bringing up George had been a mistake, but if she'd tried to leave him out of her explanations, her suspicions, it would have felt like she was deceiving them. Still, she couldn't blame them for wanting to avoid her.

There was another possibility, of course. Maybe Mr Bill had decided to use them to punish her for her indiscretion. Would he go after Xen and Mary instead? She tried to reassure herself that she hadn't actually seen or heard from Mr Bill directly since that phone call in the park. Maybe he had no idea of her research or her talking about what she'd found. Just because he was a supernatural murderer didn't make him omniscient. The thought would have been comforting, if she'd believed it for a second.

Just let me know you're alive she typed, before deleting that as well.

It wasn't just Xen and Mary, she realised with a start. She hadn't heard from anyone in days. No other calls or communication. There hadn't even been a reply to her somewhat desperate email to her sister apologising again for missing the baby shower and asking if they wanted to go for dinner at some point. Diya reflexively refreshed her inbox and was briefly excited to see a new email, until it became clear it was just marketing spam from Holland & Barrett. Even being erased from reality couldn't stop junk mail.

Not that it was happening to her. She was still here. She was.

Her home was silent, as it had been the whole time she'd been here. She'd only been outside once, picking up groceries from the local Co-Op. It had been late enough that there had been no-one else in the shop except for a cashier who didn't make eye contact with her.

Was this how it was, just drifting through the world, unnoticed and alone? No, that was ridiculous. She was just letting her isolation get to her. Xen and Mary were fine, and Diya was still a part of the world. She just needed to get out of the house for a while.

There was a park not too far from her. It was pretty small, only a few hundred square metres, plus an area for dogs. It was just a loop of path around a central bit of greenery where kids might come for a bit of a kickabout. But it was there, it was outside and, Diya sighed in relief when she reached it, it was pretty full. There were the shouts of children running

after a ball one of them had kicked too hard, some mothers with prams chatting to each other, and a couple of joggers doing gentle circuits around the path.

Diya found herself a small metal bench near the dog park and sat down, trying not to dwell on the memory of her other recent park bench experience. She let herself absorb the tableau of colour and movement and life. She watched a beautiful golden retriever jogging along, enormously pleased with itself for the big stick it was carrying in its mouth, as a slobbery pug bobbed behind it. The cold fresh air felt good after the dry central heating of the living room where she'd been sitting for most of the last three days.

There was the gentle bump of something hitting her foot, and Diya looked down to see a bright orange football just in front of her. Half a dozen kids were running after it, though they slowed down when they saw it had arrived at an adult.

'Can ya kick it back?' one of the girls called to her.

The kid was taller than the other children, with long brown hair tied into a loose ponytail, and Diya was momentarily overwhelmed by being actually spoken to directly by another human being. She wanted to reply, to say something, but she had nothing.

'The ball,' the girl said, pointing to it as though Diya might just not have noticed it.

'Y-yeah,' Diya replied.

She tried to kick it without actually getting up from the bench, but ended up doing it so badly that it rolled away both slowly and in completely the wrong direction. The children didn't seem to mind, turning to chase after it the moment it crossed back onto the grass. She watched them go, finally satisfied that she was still entirely real.

Leaning back on the bench Diya regretted not bringing something to read, or at least some headphones to listen to music. But then would she just be blocking out the world that she was so desperately trying to experience again? It was fine, she could watch the passage of life for a little while longer before she became bored.

She watched one of the joggers round the circuit, an athletic looking white guy with rather embarrassing faux-dreadlocks tied up in a bandana, then moved to the mothers who were now wheeling away their strollers,

still lost in their conversation. Finally, she checked out the buildings that surrounded the park; a set of squat apartment blocks that were probably from the eighties. They sat just on the other side of the tall iron fence that ringed the park. It was a dingy day, and a few of the windows had lights on. One with lace curtains that made Diya think of her grandmother's house, one almost entirely blocked by the back of a desktop monitor, and one …

The sense of well-being vanished instantly. It must have been forty metres or more between the window and where Diya was sitting, but she still instantly recognised the wide, horrible smile of the figure that stood there, staring out directly at her. The gleeful shouts of the children and barking of playing dogs seemed to fade into the background as their eyes met. She tried to break eye contact, to turn her face away from him, but her muscles simply didn't respond. Finally, Mr Bill turned slowly away and stepped back into the apartment.

Diya blinked, her eyeballs suddenly feeling very dry. How long had she been sitting there? She glanced around. The kids were gone, along with the joggers, and the sun was just starting to go down, painting the gloomy sky in a dirty purple. Those few people still in the park had their coats pulled tight and their hoods up, clearly hurrying from one side to another, and it took a few moments for Diya to realise she was being spattered by a patchy rain. Was this it? Was the end coming? Or was this just another step in Mr Bill's torturous game …?

'No,' she whispered to herself. She refused. This was not how she was going to live, overcome by the fear that at any moment what happiness she had could be stripped away from her. If he was going to try to kill her, then he'd have to give it his best shot. More than that, she realised, if there was someone who lived in that flat …

Decision made, Diya made a note of which window she had seen Mr Bill in, and raced through the drizzle towards the building. The concrete exterior staircase wasn't gated, and she climbed it quickly, trying to keep the momentum of her decision to confront this murderer who she was less and less convinced was anything even remotely human. About halfway up the stairs her rising fear tried to weigh her down, to stop her pushing forward, but Diya didn't let it.

It was only when she found herself stood in front of Flat 9, hand poised to ring the doorbell, that she hesitated. The door was solid and

unremarkable, dark brown wood with a steel slot for letters and a sun-faded sign that read NO JUNK MAIL. Diya clenched her teeth and pushed the button. Somewhere deep inside echoed electronic ringing. She waited, and waited, and pushed the doorbell again, but still with no response. Was she too late? Finally, she tried the handle on the front door, and found it unlocked.

The door opened easily, silently, with no resistance or creaking, as though it were eager for Diya to come inside. Was that it? Did he *want* her to come and find him? Had she played right into his hands? If so, it was too late to back out now. She stepped over the threshold.

‘Hello?’

There was no response. Her hand explored the wall until she found a light switch, which she flicked on, revealing a completely empty hallway. No furniture, no carpet, there wasn’t even a lampshade on the dim bulb that hung down from the ceiling. Just bare floorboards and silence. No-one lived here.

At this realisation her heart beat faster. This was feeling more and more like a trap, like she had been deliberately lured here, and the sensible part of her was pleading to get out of there. But she didn’t. She had made her decision and, one way or another, she was going to find out what Mr Bill wanted.

‘Where are you, you leering dickhead?’ she shouted, trying to sound significantly braver than she was feeling. Again, the flat was silent.

‘Fine,’ Diya spat, and searched the rooms.

The living room was as empty as the hallway, with nothing inside save the window Mr Bill had been watching from. She went over to the spot, but aside from a slight chill to the floorboards where he’d been standing, there was no hint he had ever been there at all. The kitchen was empty but for a single rotten apple core and an old cigarette end in the sink, and the bathroom looked like it had been cleaned thoroughly a long time ago and not used since. There were two rooms that could have been bedrooms, and Diya opened the door to the first quickly, confirming to herself there was nothing inside. When her hand reached for the second, however, she paused. If Mr Bill was going to be here at all it had to be in this room, and she had definitely been brought here for something. She pushed it open.

Sitting there, in the middle of the floor in an otherwise bare room, was a small, plush shark. Its stuffing was old and worn, the blue of the fabric that made its upper body had faded with time and its bright white felt teeth had turned a dusty grey. Diya knew it instantly.

‘S-Senyor Tooth?’ she said, recognising Angie’s old stuffed toy. She had got it from the Sea Life Centre when they were nine years old, and Angie had tried to name him Señor Tooth, but her childish spelling had quickly amended it to ‘Senyor’. She had kept it through all the years they’d been friends, resolutely ignoring any inference that there had been a mistake and insisting it was simply a first name (‘like Seymour’).

And then it hit her. Angie. A wave of dizziness passed over her at the realisation. No, it was impossible. Other people knew Angie, other people remembered her. Right? She mentally scanned back, trying to remember if anyone else had actually said her name since … And Diya thought about those last few weeks of Angie’s life. How quiet she had been, how she had stopped going out as much as she used to. Diya hadn’t really noticed at the time, too caught up with the stresses of her old job, but the more she thought about it, the more she realised how alone her friend had been near the end. Angie had been a social creature, but there had always been a distance around her, and Diya knew theirs was the only really close friendship she had. Had it been worse than she thought? Had Angie truly been that alone?

The shark lay there, a taunting trophy. No, Mr Bill couldn’t have killed her. The doctor had said it was an aneurysm. He couldn’t have made that happen, could he? Maybe he didn’t always do the killing himself. Maybe he was more like some sort of parasite, feeding off memory.

Now, staring at the hollowed-out cloth of Senyor Tooth, Diya was certain of three things. Mr Bill had killed Angie. Mr Bill was not even a little bit human. And Mr Bill could get to her at any time he— Any time *it* wished to. That was the message, and it was clear as day.

Diya reached over to pick up the stuffed toy, her happiness at seeing it again momentarily drowning out her fear, even though she knew it was probably a trap. She couldn’t leave the stuffed shark here, any more than she could have left Angie.

The texture of the toy felt all wrong in her hand. It was no longer full of well-loved stuffing, but something else that felt shifting and oddly crunchy

in her hand. Something that moved and shook slightly against her fingertips.

It didn’t explode, as Diya had anticipated. It was much slower than that. First a single pale brown shape squirmed its way through the fabric and out to the surface and took flight, then another, then two, then six, then a hundred tiny fluttering shapes all swarmed out, filling the room with motion. Moths. It was filled with hundreds, thousands of carpet moths.

Diya staggered backwards, waving the shell of the stuffed shark about frantically, half trying to defend herself from the flittering tornado, half trying to dislodge any moths still inside it. One of the flittering things brushed against her lips, as though trying to crawl into her mouth, and she choked down the scream that was building within her, too scared to take a breath. But she wasn’t going to lose Senyor Tooth, she absolutely refused. She fought her way through the chaos to the door and pulled it open, running into the hallway, trying to keep her eyes closed as much as possible as she pushed through the frantically moving insects. At last she was at the front door to the flat. She pulled it open and fell onto the concrete walkway outside, feeling the swarm pass over her skin as it poured out and away into the evening.

The concrete was rough and cold against her cheek, and Diya found it oddly comforting as she lay there, waiting for her heart to begin beating normally again. It was solid and real and secure, and she let it ground her as the tears came. She looked over what was left of Senyor Tooth: a limp sock of torn and pock-marked fabric, with one plastic eye looking out at her. Still, it could be repaired, it could be saved. It wasn’t gone for good.

A sudden thought occurred to her and her stomach dropped. Clutching the shark, she took off at a dead run towards home.

Barrelling through the door, she dashed to Angie’s old room and grabbed the one of the green notebooks. The scrapbooks they had spent so long painstakingly putting together, full of pictures and comments and … They were blank. Pages clearly worn from time and use but unmarked by writing, instant photos stuck to the paper that were white and blank, as if they were massively overexposed. Diya threw the book across the room and grabbed another. It was the same, as empty as the first one, just a hollowed-out shell like …

Diya laid Senyor Teeth down next to the blank scrapbook, and checked her phone. Nothing. No photos of Angie on her camera roll, nothing in her messages, even Diya's Facebook profile, once filled with pictures of the two of them, had no sign of her friend. She found a few photos of large groups where she remembered Angie had definitely been present, and they simply no longer included her. Sometimes that area of the image would be oddly warped or full of strange digital artifacting, while other times the removal was so clean that Diya found herself questioning whether Angie had ever been in the photograph at all.

A bitter smile crept to Diya's lips as she thought of the conversations she had had with her parents, of the encounter with Greg. They hadn't mentioned Angie, had they? Not really. How strange it must have seemed to them, watching Diya grieve for someone who they had no idea ever existed.

Angie was gone, then. Mr Bill had done it. Maybe he'd done it ages ago and Diya simply hadn't noticed before. What did that make her? She opened up the phone function and scrolled down to her mother's number. The call rang twice before it was picked up.

'Hello?' Her mother sounded slightly distracted.

'Ma,' Diya cut her off. 'You remember my friend, the one I was living with for ages. The one who died.'

'Sorry, who is this?'

Diya's stomach dropped.

'It's Diya. Your daughter.'

'Oh, yes, of course,' her mother said, and Diya tried to feel reassured. 'What was the question?'

'My housemate. She died, remember?'

'Y-yes …' her mother replied uncertainly. 'Of course, I do, the poor dear.'

'What was her name?'

'I, uh, what do you mean?' her mother sounded baffled.

This was pointless, of course. Diya had known how this call was going to end before she'd even pressed 'call', but some sort of strange, masochistic urge propelled her forward. She had to hear her mother say it.

'Her name. The name of my best friend, the one you never liked, who I've known since I was a child. I just need to know if you remember it. Or what she looked like, how she sounded. Do you remember any of it?'

There was a long, uncomfortable pause at the other end.

‘I’m so sorry, but you always had so many friends. I could never really tell them apart.’

Sitting on the floor of Angie’s room, Diya said nothing.

‘I’m sorry, darling, but I’m in the middle of cooking.’ A distance had come over her mother’s voice. ‘I’ll give you a call once I’m done.’

‘Wait, I want—’ Diya started, desperate not to lose the connection, but the phone call ended. Diya was certain that her mother would not call her back. That she would simply forget to do so.

A final thought struck her, a single, desperate lifeline that might, just might, be something she could cling to. Diya returned to the shelf and grabbed the small jewellery box near where the notebooks had sat, which had originally contained a cheap necklace. She could feel it was empty as soon as she picked it up, but Diya opened it anyway to confirm what she already knew: the small smooth pebble they had kept for all those years was gone.

And that was the moment she broke. Something deep inside Diya cracked. She didn’t collapse to the floor this time or burst into tears, she wasn’t even sure she could have cried if she wanted to. She simply walked slowly to the living room and sat down, staring out into space. She was now the only one who remembered Angie’s existence, and when she was gone, there would be no-one.

Then, gradually at first, but spreading through her chest, the lead weight of grief started to change, heating up with a spark of primeval anger until it was a deep, burning rage that left her shaking. How dare this evil, parasitic thing do this to her, to her friends, to anyone? Treating people’s lives and memories as something to be toyed with and eaten and destroyed like they were nothing? She wouldn’t let it continue. She no longer cared what Mr Bill was, what power it might wield. Somehow, she was going to find a way to make it suffer, to destroy it once and for all. What did it matter if it cost her life as well? She had heard her mother’s voice, how long was she even going to remember she had another daughter? Mr Bill had made a mistake picking Diya, because what more did she have to lose? She was going to find some way to *hurt* Mr Bill.

Her phone lit up again, and rang. It was Xen. The relief Diya would have expected to feel at knowing that her friend still remembered her didn’t

come, though. It couldn’t get through the fury that was still roiling in her chest.

‘Yes?’ she said, answering the call.

‘Diya, hey.’ Xen sounded strained. ‘Look, sorry we haven’t got back to you it’s been … It’s been a bit weird.’

‘That’s OK,’ Diya said, trying not to let the anger bleed into her voice. ‘I understand. Have we got a job?’

‘Uh, yeah. Priory Court in Walthamstow, near Blackhorse Road tube station. Vermont House. Look, Diya—’

‘It’s OK, we’ll talk when I get there. I’ll see you soon.’

‘I … Sure. See you there.’

18

The Priory Court Job

Vermont House was another big block of flats in a crowd of big blocks of flats gathered together off Priory Road. It was five storeys tall, bright white, and had a sort of curved metal roof that went over the top but didn't seem to fully connect to every part of the building. It looked nothing like the other places Diya had worked in during her time with Slough & Sons, and yet somehow it was exactly the same as all of them. Even after only four or five months of doing this job, it was astounding how it managed to condense the chaotic and conflicting architecture of London into a blurred line-up of run-down flats and the same three ranges of cheap IKEA furniture the landlord had filled them with. Sometimes someone had filled the space with plants, but they weren't fooling anyone. At least the flat they were dealing with this time was on the ground floor, so there would be no huge flights of stairs or shaky lifts to navigate.

All through the journey over, Diya had been trying desperately to hold onto the anger, to keep the energetic rage she had felt, but the closer she got, the more she realised that she didn't know exactly what she wanted to do. And so it had slowly begun to dissipate, giving way to something that wasn't quite fear. It was an aching worry; a realisation she had no idea exactly what the situation was that she was going into, and cursing herself that she hadn't talked to Xen longer on the phone to find out exactly what was going on. She'd been so pumped to go over there and do *something*, she hadn't had the patience to actually find out what might need to be done.

Well, it was too late now. By the time she was out of the Underground and had signal again, it was only a short walk to Priory Court, and she might as well go and see for herself. It certainly didn't seem any different to

a normal job as she approached the building. There was the van, sitting proudly in a parking spot just outside one of the ground-floor flats. It wasn't dented, bloodstained or aflame. There were the familiar signs of activity around the open door and the ozone machine sat just outside the threshold with a bucket of various cleaning bottles placed on top of it. A few passers-by made their way silently around the streets, not sparing more than a glance at the place, heading towards whatever destinations or appointments were waiting for them. It all seemed normal.

Diya went up to the van and tried the handle on the back door. It opened, and inside everything was where it should be. She looked at her coveralls lying there, waiting for her, not exactly laid out but certainly in a more prominent position than they normally were. All right then. She picked them up and got dressed. Until she knew what the situation actually was, she decided her best course of action was probably to just continue as if everything *was* normal, at least for now. She wasn't in the mood for any weird visions, but they tended not to kick in straight away.

As she pulled the suit over her arms, a figure appeared in the open doorway. The mask was pulled down and Frank's moustache bristled over a mouth set in an expression of determination. Diya didn't move, didn't say anything, waiting for him to see her. After a good ten seconds of fumbling with his pipe, he spotted her standing there.

'Diya!' he called. It wasn't a tone of anger or recrimination, as she had expected. If anything, he sounded relieved.

Frank came over quickly and gave her a hurried once-over, as if checking for something.

'Glad to see you made it,' he continued. 'Was a bit worried. You feeling better?'

'Yeah,' Diya lied reflexively, deciding not to volunteer any more information than she needed to.

'Right, well, we've only just started, so if you want to help Mary in the living room that'd probably be a good start.'

'OK, will do.' She nodded, sealing up her suit and moving away from him a little bit quicker than perhaps she needed to.

The inside of the small apartment was exactly as Diya had pictured it. A line of coat hooks against the wall with the tops broken off about half of them. A cheap, spherical paper lampshade coated in dust. Magnolia paint

on the walls that she knew would come off on anything that she tried to clean them with. Nothing here to surprise or alarm her. She had a guess at which door the living room was going to be based on the other places they'd worked and got it right first time.

Mary was inside, examining a ratty brown rug that lay on the ground between a fold-out sofa bed and a torn fabric armchair, trying to figure out if it could be salvaged or whether it needed to be disposed of. She looked round as Diya entered, nodded, then turned her eyes back to the rug before realising who she had seen and jumping to her feet.

'Diya! You're here. Sorry, I should … Xen said … Hold on,' she stammered. 'Wait here.'

Before Diya could ask any of the questions she had waiting on her tongue, Mary moved quickly past her and out through the living room door, shutting it quickly behind her. Diya wondered whether to follow her, but the door reopened almost immediately and Mary returned with Xen in tow. Once they were both inside, Xen turned and closed the door quietly behind them, making sure it was shut.

'Diya, I'm so sorry,' she began.

'What the hell's going on?' Diya asked, keeping her voice low. 'Why didn't you call me, or drop me a text or *something*? I thought you might be dead!'

'I know, that was … It wasn't on. We just—'

'It was my fault,' Mary interjected. 'I was … hurt. Angry.'

'We really got into it once we left the cafe, and it was kinda messy. We agreed to not talk to you until we had a better idea where our heads were at.'

'Don't cover for me,' Mary said. 'We didn't "agree". I made her promise.'

Diya choked back an outburst of swearing and hurt that tried to force its way out of her.

'That was a really shitty thing to do,' she said coldly. 'I thought … I've been having a *really* bad time.'

The heavy silence made it clear that she had not been alone in that.

'I'm sorry,' Mary said at last. 'I'm sorry I couldn't accept what you said.'

'What made you change your mind?'

Xen and Mary exchanged a glance.

‘Yesterday.’ Xen took a breath. ‘We got a job. Came in late. Dad told me to give you a call and let you know, but, well, we were still in a rough place and I told him you were sick.’

The anger flared up again, but Diya said nothing.

‘It was an old man,’ Mary continued the story. ‘He was all alone, died in his flat and it was two weeks before anyone found him. Just a normal job. We started to get to work, but then—’

‘Mr Bill showed up.’ Xen’s voice was shaky. ‘Just strolled on in. Dad looked like … I’ve never seen him like that before. Like he was going to throw up. But they went off into a side room to talk.’

‘We tried to listen in.’

‘Couldn’t hear much, but they were … They were talking about you. Dad was saying something about loyalty, or something. He sounded scared. Then Mr Bill comes out, gives us a smile, and walks out.’

‘We followed him.’ Mary’s voice was small.

‘And I’m thinking about everything you said, about him and Dad and George and … When he’s outside, I march up to confront him. I don’t know what I thought I was going to say, but it was all so much, and that awful fucking grin of his, I just …’

‘What did you do?’ Diya’s mouth was dry.

‘I punched him,’ Xen said. ‘I punched him in the face.’

Despite it all, Diya smiled. Xen didn’t notice, instead pulling off the glove on her right hand. Underneath, the skin was red, blotchy and peeling, like it had been burned.

‘Fucker’s not human,’ Xen said, no trace of uncertainty in her voice. ‘It went … I went *into* him.’

Diya just stood there, staring at her friend’s hand, and felt her own fingers instinctively close into a fist.

‘What happened then? What did he do?’

‘He laughed,’ Mary said, with more venom than Diya had ever heard from her before. ‘He called us “silly little girls” and laughed. He said our family wasn’t what it used to be, and then he left.’

Mary was shaking now, and moved over to sit down on the sofa, putting her gloved hand to her forehead. Xen went over and sat by her sister, injured hand wordlessly reaching out to comfort her.

There was a silence. Diya took a moment to let the information settle in, then finally asked a question she already felt she knew the answer to.

‘This is another Mr Bill job, right?’

Xen paused, clearly reluctant to answer.

‘Yeah. I’m pretty sure it is.’

‘This makes three in a row, right? Are they normally this frequent?’

‘No,’ Mary said, nodding. ‘You’re right. I think they’re getting closer together.’

‘Like it’s building towards something.’

‘But what?’

My death, Diya instinctively thought. But was she still certain that was the case? He’d certainly toyed with his other victims beforehand, but this felt different somehow. After all, none of the others had been working for him, and the longer he kept Diya alive, the more likely it was she might discover something he didn’t want her to. Was there something else happening here?

‘I don’t know.’ Diya shook her head. ‘But it’s not going to be anything good, is it? Have you talked to your dad about this at all?’

‘No,’ Xen said, embarrassed, the fear evident in her voice. ‘I think he knows something’s up, but we wanted to wait until you were here. What’s the plan?’

The plan? What fucking plan? Diya couldn’t help but feel a pang of resentment that it felt so much like they had thrown her to the wolves and now suddenly wanted to hide behind her. But she did understand. She had come to them with all of this, and at the end of the day it wasn’t *her* dad they’d be facing down. Still, they were all in it now, for better or worse, and they had to figure out what they were going to actually do.

‘OK, then,’ she said at last. ‘I think we need to talk to him. He has to know what’s going on. More than we do, at least. Let’s go.’

‘Now?’ Mary couldn’t hide her panic at the idea. ‘Shouldn’t we take a few minutes to prepare, or decide what we’re going to say or something? What are we going to say about George?’

‘We might have to wait a little bit anyway,’ Xen chimed in. ‘He said he had to go speak to the building manager about a few things.’

‘You sure that’s what he’s doing?’ Diya said, trying not to come across as accusatory.

‘I mean, no. I guess. You wanna go check?’

‘Yeah, I do. Come on.’

The two of them followed Diya, Mary somewhat reluctantly, as she led them outside, where there was no sign of Frank. A quick search of the flat confirmed that he wasn’t inside, either.

‘Do you know where the building manager’s office is?’ Diya asked.

‘I don’t even know if they *have* an office.’ Xen shrugged.

‘Then I guess we wait for him to get back,’ Mary said uneasily, ‘and hope he comes back alone.’

‘We should have a look round while he’s gone’ Diya nodded. ‘Try to figure out what that thing wants with whoever used to live here.’

‘What makes him such an appealing victim,’ Xen said.

‘Diya.’ Mary put a hand on her shoulder. ‘Are you sure that’s a good idea? What about your, uh, visions?’

There was a moment of hesitation as Diya considered this. She was growing less and less sure that the visions were actually the dead themselves reaching out to her. Might they actually be part of Mr Bill’s plans somehow? And would knowing more about the man who lived here, about how he died, actually help them? She didn’t want to be disorientated when talking to Frank, but seeing it might give them useful information. Maybe she should look for something to set one off. Get a bit more control of it.

‘I’ll be fine,’ she said, and hoped that she meant it.

The flat wasn’t large, and it didn’t take much time to search it. Xen found an old bronze-covered medal in the bedroom, apparently awarded for completing a 10k charity run in 2007, while Mary found an old ring binder full of documents. In it, dozens of clear plastic sleeves held certificates, bills, receipts, everything needed to keep a life organised and together.

‘Look,’ Diya said, pointing to where the text had already begun to fade and disappear.

‘What the fuck?’ Xen breathed.

‘It’s what he does.’ Even Diya was surprised by how matter-of-fact her voice was. ‘He deletes them. Like they never existed.’

Enough information remained to learn the man’s name had been Cecil Kent. She held the name in her head for a few moments, trying to fix it

there and keep it safe, but she knew it was no good.

Near the end of the binder the organisation of it began to break down. Letters that would previously have been neatly filed away were instead piled up haphazardly, shoved at the end of it as though the person compiling them couldn't bear to think of them any longer. There were medical letters – apparently he'd been diabetic – followed by some curt letters from the Department of Work and Pensions informing him of the cessation of his benefits, then some very scary-looking bank statements. They were dated several weeks ago. Diya felt cold as she thought of how completely empty the kitchen had been when she checked it, and pieced together what must have happened to the man who lived here.

No, she thought suddenly. Part of her had been searching for whatever might trigger the vision, but she wasn't going to do that. Absolutely not. She wasn't going to experience a man dying of starvation, she refused. But what if there was something in the vision she needed to know? What if it held the key to stopping Mr Bill?

Her thoughts were cut short by the sound of Mary's voice from outside.

'Dad's back,' she said.

The three of them moved slowly down the hallway towards the front of the flat, doing their best not to panic each other or themselves by hurrying. Xen lit up a cigarette, just to keep her hands busy. She offered the pack to Diya and Mary, but they both shook their heads.

Frank got closer. As he approached the house he saw them standing there, waiting, and his expression turned to one of guarded concern.

'Everything all right?' he said, his eyes darting to the door behind them, trying to see if there was smoke or flames or any obvious evidence of a disaster.

'Mr Slough, uh, Frank,' Diya started.

'We need to talk,' Xen said, covering her fear with a touch of aggression.

'About what?' Frank's face had assumed that carefully neutral expression they all knew so well.

'Mr Bill,' Mary said quietly.

Frank's face twitched, ever so slightly, and he stopped a few metres away. Diya would have sworn the wind had died down.

'Look,' he said, trying to cover his clear unease with an uncharacteristic smile, 'I know you don't like the guy, you've made that very clear. But just

because—’

‘What the fuck is he?’ Xen spat.

There was a long silence.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ Frank tried.

‘We know what’s going on,’ Diya said, her voice low but forceful. ‘We know what that thing does, what we’ve been doing for it.’

A pause.

‘Look, I don’t know what ideas you’ve got in your head, but we can talk about it after the job’s done.’ He gestured to the flat behind them.

‘We’re not cleaning another damn thing for that … monster,’ Xen said. ‘Let’s just call this a strike.’

‘That’s not—’ Frank sounded like he was trying to keep control of the fear in his voice. ‘Look, we need to finish this job. We need to. Now, whatever you want from me afterwards—’

‘We want to know why!’ Mary shouted, cutting her father off. ‘He killed George! And you just took his money and made us help? Why?!’

There was a moment where it looked like he was going to deny it. His eyes flicked from Xen, to Mary, then settled on Diya. And he nodded, like he should have known this was coming. She wasn’t family. She was change.

‘Because we always have,’ Frank said, his voice low and certain. ‘Because that is what this family does. And because George is what happens when we don’t, and I told him that. He tried to fight it, to ward it off with his charms and his books, but it didn’t work. It never works. There was only one way to protect you from it, and if you saw what I have, then you would be *thanking* me for what I’ve done.’

‘I’ve seen it,’ Diya said. ‘I’ve felt it happen.’

‘No, you haven’t,’ Frank sneered, rounding on her. ‘You’ve seen echoes, had spooky little daydreams. Same as George, same as me. That’s why he wanted you on board, but you don’t understand. This is family business and you’ve no place here. None of you know what he’s capable of. I watched him ta … My own brother.’

Frank took a moment, swallowing down the pulse of emotion that threatened to overtake him, like he’d been locking it down this whole time so this didn’t happen.

‘And if I had told you? What would you do about it? You’re all young. Stupid. You’d have said no. You’d have tried to fight it.’

‘Like George? Or—’ A thought appeared to occur to Xen. ‘Or like Mum?’

Frank’s face paled, but he shook his head.

‘No. No your mother was … She was never involved, thank God. The cancer took her and she never knew what this family really does.’

‘Why should we believe anything you say?’ Mary hissed.

‘Please. We need to get back to work,’ Frank said, with a voice that verged on pleading. ‘I don’t know if I can protect you if we don’t.’

‘We don’t want your protection.’ Xen shook her head. ‘And we’re not going back in there. This is over.’

‘Don’t do this,’ he begged. ‘Diya, I thought you were smarter than this. I hoped …’

He trailed off, his eyes falling to the ground.

‘Fuck!’ he screamed, slamming his fist into the side of the van, crunching the ‘g’ in Slough & Sons into the panel and leaving a deep dent. Then all the fight seemed to leave him at once and he staggered, placing his hand on the wing mirror to steady himself. He suddenly looked so old.

‘You need to tell us everything,’ Diya said at last, looking at the pale, shell-shocked faces of Xen and Mary.

Frank nodded, defeated. He blinked back tears.

‘I guess I do.’

19

Frank

‘Some people just aren’t worth as much as others.’

It was one of the first things Frank ever remembered his father saying to him. He couldn’t have been older than five or six, and he had been playing with a little tin train on the floor as Davey rolled around and cooed next to him. He had no idea what his dad had read to spur that comment, but he lowered the newspaper to just below his sharp, bird-like face and said it, his eyes locked on Frank’s.

‘They’ll try to tell you otherwise, Francis, all them bleeding hearts and the God-botherers. They’ll tell you everyone has value, that they deserve as much as you do. But they don’t. Some people are just a waste, and when they go the only thing they leave behind is a tidier world.’

The young Frank said nothing in response. What could he possibly have had to contribute to a conversation like that? But he sat there anyway, waiting to see if his father had anything more he wanted to say. The newspaper lifted again, covering the stern, clean-shaven face, and a few moments later the familiar curls of cigarette smoke billowed out from behind it. Frank returned to his train.

He’d never known a time when he wasn’t in awe of his father. Looking back, he was never able to tell where his fear of the man stopped and his respect began, but they bled into each other like paint, forming a very particular sort of regard. Francis Slough Senior was a hard man who tolerated little in the way of backtalk or questioning. He had a way with words, though he used them rarely enough, and would sometimes break the silence of hours to declaim at length his views on the problems of the

world: the shiftless, the weak, the *complainers*. There was no greater sin in his eyes than whining about your lot in life, something his sons learned at a very young age.

‘No-one ever got a shilling back from wishing,’ he would say when they would pass a fountain full of pennies. ‘You waste your time and money like that, you’re an idiot, might as well throw yourself down the well after it.’

Their mother was only ever the faintest of memories. A vague spectre in the back of Frank’s childhood, smelling of lavender soap and oven grease. She was gone by the time his brother David was a year old. Not dead, just gone. Their father detested lies as the refuge of those who couldn’t stomach the world, so he never told them she died, but he didn’t talk about her, either. The few times one of them brought it up, he would simply stare at them in silence until they left or changed the subject. Once, when he was ten, Frank had found a small box in his father’s room, filled with postcards and letters to him and Davey that went right up to his seventh birthday. He must have left evidence of his presence, though, since when he went back a few days later to read them properly, the entire box was gone. His dad never spoke of it.

Frank and David were raised in fits and starts by a succession of their father’s girlfriends: quiet women of domestic inclination who would simply appear as part of the Slough household almost overnight, then vanish just as abruptly a few months later when they started to actually speak up. In between these, there would be the looming, affectionate figure of Aunt Mary, a rosy-faced relative who wore thick crimson lipstick that didn’t suit her face and cooked awful recipes she found in second-hand cookbooks. Frank liked her a lot, and she was the only one who ever talked back to their father and got away with it, laughing uproariously whenever he launched into one of his bitter monologues. Her visits became more and more infrequent as they grew, however, and some days the boys were left to fend entirely for themselves.

‘Take care of your brother,’ their father would growl as he walked out the door, an instruction the young Frank took very seriously, much to the irritation of Davey, who furiously resented having to defer to his older brother’s authority.

The two of them grew up wild, becoming a pair of fighting, boisterous hellions by the age of ten. They would chase each other through their tall

house, the nicest on the terrace and certainly the only one with fewer than six people living in it. They would scream and shout and do each other the occasional injury, all of which seemed to roll effortlessly off the back of their father as he sat in his old armchair reading the news or listening to something on the radio.

The only time they were quiet was on Sunday nights. That was when the workmen came around. A group of three or four uncles or cousins, who shared their surname with Frank and Davey, and shared their hard, stern faces with Francis Senior. They would drink, shout and curse at each other, filling the front room with thick clouds of choking smoke as Frank, and sometimes his brother, watched them through the bannisters on the staircase, long after they were supposed to be asleep. These roaring men were terrifying, but the way they talked was fascinating to Frank, especially at those moments where the conversation would take on a more hushed and cautious character, everyone speaking in low tones he could barely make out. It was the first time he ever heard the name ‘Mr Bill’, and the effect that it had on the assembled crowd of gruff, sneering men was something that wouldn’t make sense to him for almost a decade. That was the night his father caught him, and Frank did not eavesdrop again.

The curtains at the Slough home were closed, although the afternoon was still bright outside. Mary kept lifting the edges of them, staring at the road outside, her fingers drumming her leg. They’d turned the lights on when they arrived, so it didn’t feel like they were huddling in the dark, but it was a small gesture, something to make it feel a little bit more secure than it actually was. None of them were under any illusions that they’d be able to keep out Mr Bill if it wanted to come inside.

Frank had broken off his story, getting to his feet and pacing with a nervous energy that Diya had never seen in the man before.

‘This is pointless,’ he said abruptly. ‘We need to get back to work.’

He looked at Mary, then at Xen, who shook her head slowly.

‘You don’t understand. You’re messing with something bigger than any of us. He can kill all of us, any time he wants. We have a job, and if we don’t do it this entire family is *done*. I can’t watch you end up like George. I won’t.’

If there was any shaking of the siblings' resolve, the mention of George seemed to harden it immediately. Frank let out a noise of frustration and fear, then sat back down,

'You'd never heard of Mr Bill before then?' Diya asked, trying to get him back to the story.

'Not really. Dunno, feels like I've kinda always known about him. Been scared of him.' Frank shifted awkwardly. It was clear he hated talking like this, but everyone, himself included, knew that it needed to be done. 'But that was the first time I remember having a name to put to it.'

'Then why the hell are we talking about it?' Xen snapped. 'We know grandpa was a piece of shit, so thanks for the newsflash.'

'No it's …' Frank took a breath. 'I'm trying to say that he'd always been with this family. I don't know when or how he tied himself to us—'

'1920,' Diya interjected. 'Or late 1910s, maybe. Sometime around then when Slough & Sons was first set up.'

'How do you—?'

'She's been doing some reading,' Mary said. 'Old archive newspapers.'

'So what?' Xen was struggling to control her nerves. 'What the hell does the history matter? He could be here any moment.'

'I don't know,' Diya conceded. 'Maybe if we understand where Mr Bill comes from, we might be able to figure out some way to fight it.'

'You can't fight him.' Frank shook his head. 'You're wasting your time.'

There was such defeat in his voice, and Diya suddenly understood that he *had* to believe that. To think otherwise would be to admit that he had willingly allowed his son to die. For a moment, she felt a deep and burning pity for Frank Slough. She pushed on.

'When your great-grandfather, or maybe great-great-grandfather, set up the company, he apparently had a weird assistant who the papers called "William". It was just after the end of World War One.'

'What? You think he has something to do with the war?' Frank didn't sound convinced.

'I hadn't actually thought about that. I don't know. Maybe?'

Xen let out a snort of laughter in spite of herself. 'What? Like some twist on Remembrance Day? Forgetting Day?'

'Maybe. Maybe after something as huge and horrible as a world war, something might have crawled out with a taste for human suffering.'

‘Crawled out of where?’ Mary shifted uncomfortably on the old sofa.

‘I don’t know.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Frank said decisively. ‘Fact is, he’s always been with us. Doesn’t age. Doesn’t change. It’s just always been … A tradition, I guess.’

‘Sorry?’ Now it was Mary’s turn to let out a disbelieving laugh. ‘Are you saying that it’s a “family tradition” to feed some immortal monster?’

‘Isn’t that what most traditions are?’ Xen said wryly.

‘What does he want from us?’ Diya ignored them. ‘What does he need us for? He has us clearing away the traces of the people he kills. Is that so there’s no evidence when he consumes their memories, or are we somehow the ones erasing them?’

‘He explained it to me once,’ Frank said. ‘I don’t remember much of what he said, didn’t really understand it. I know he said he needed us “complicit”. And it had something to do with us experiencing what he did to them.’

‘Complicit? How can we be complicit?’ Xen asked. ‘You never told us any of this.’

‘It was always there,’ Mary replied sadly. ‘You know it always felt weird. We just didn’t want to see it.’

‘Hold on, back up,’ Diya said, her eyes turning back to Frank. ‘Us “experiencing” their deaths? Are you talking about my visions?’

‘Always thought of them as dreams myself.’

‘Then you knew. You get them too.’

‘Just like George,’ Mary whispered.

‘He needs someone sensitive to them running the business. For a long time, that’s been me.’

It had been the wheelchair that set it off. It had just been there in the corner. Not a modern design of padding and fabric, but something older, harder, all solid wood and dull metal. It was only Frank’s third job, working with his father and a couple of cousins whose names he still hadn’t learned. He’d been left alone to clear out what looked like a study of some sort, but he couldn’t pull his eyes away from this uncomfortable-looking thing. The pictures on the wall showed a man in an RAF pilot uniform, and there was a

case holding what looked like a Military Cross. All together it painted a pretty clear picture of who the dead man was.

Frank should have got on with his job, he should have left well enough alone. But there was something about that wheelchair, looming silently at the edge of his vision, that fascinated him. And so he put down his scrubbing brush and sat on it.

He hadn't noticed the changes at first. The aching of his bones, the coldness of the room, the fury he felt as he watched the young men outside laugh and swear and leer at women, knowing that they wouldn't have lasted five minutes over in Normandy, that with the end of National Service these layabouts and ne'er-do-wells would just fester. He'd always viewed his chair as a point of pride, a mark of what he'd sacrificed for his country, as honourable as any medal they might choose to give him, but then they'd stuck him in this second-floor flat and he couldn't leave unless the nurse came. He couldn't stand getting old.

It was certainly a weird set of thoughts for the fifteen-year-old Frank to be having, and when it passed he did his best to ignore it, to put it out of his mind as an odd daydream. This worked well enough for a while. The experience seemed to fade quickly, dissipating like a morning mist and Frank had all but forgotten it completely when they went back to finish the job the following day. The wheelchair was gone by then, tossed away by the larger of the two cousins, whose name he had discovered was Harry. The whole place looked different, almost completely empty, hollowed out by him and his family. He didn't really know how to feel about it, so he simply didn't feel anything.

He was scrubbing the overhead cistern in the bathroom when it happened again. He was trying to figure out what was dirt and what was rust as he balanced on the lid of the toilet seat to reach it. This time it started as a smell, a sort of burning, metallic smell. A car had caught fire on Frank's street once, years ago now, and the smell was so close, a combination of petrol fumes and scorched metal. But he knew exactly what it was. It was the smell of his engine catching fire, the only notice he had got before gravity had gripped him and his fighter two decades ago, pulling him down and hurling him to earth. He wasn't in his plane now, he was in his home, but still he could feel it approaching, hear the sizzle and pop of flesh on fire as it staggered towards him one step at a time. There was

nowhere he could go and nothing he could do as the smiling man opened the door, charred skin cracking around his sickening grin, wreathed in hungry flames, ready to embrace him.

It was the first and last time that one of these sights would make Frank scream. His father had walked unhurriedly into the bathroom to find him crouched in the corner, shaking.

‘What is it?’ he asked, his voice hovering between curiosity and disdain.

‘A-a man. On fire, he— I was on fire too. I was burning.’ Frank wanted to cry, but wouldn’t let himself do so under his father’s withering gaze.

‘Show me your arm.’

‘What?’

‘Show me your arm.’

Frank could hear the patience draining from his father’s voice, and did as he was told. Francis Sr gripped him firmly by the hand and looked at his wrist, where a shiny red burn was clearly visible.

Then his father did something that Frank had never seen before. He smiled with pride.

‘Harry! Harry, get in here!’ he called, still beaming.

The hulking form of Frank’s cousin filled the entrance to the bathroom, and Frank grabbed the sink and tried to pull himself up, suddenly very self-conscious of his cowering position. He stood, keeping his arm turned to show off the burn mark that his father had seemed so incredibly pleased to see, even though he didn’t really understand how he had actually got it. What he had seen couldn’t have been real. Could it?

‘What is it?’ Harry asked, uninterested.

‘Looks like we got the next generation sorted,’ his dad said. ‘My boy Francis is having the sights.’

‘Huh.’ Harry sounded surprised, but not impressed. ‘Congratulations, I guess.’

‘I told you.’

‘Suppose you did. So when’re you taking him to see Mr Bill?’

Frank’s father turned back to look at him, a glint of something horrid in those eyes, and an unaccountable fear coiled in his stomach.

‘Oh, soon enough, Harry. I don’t think there’s any rush.’

Mary placed a cup of tea in front of Diya, who wondered for a moment whether it would be rude to ask for something harder. It wouldn't have helped anyway, getting drunk would be just about the worst idea possible at this point. She took a sip of tea. It was too hot, but a small part of her welcomed the slight pain, it seemed to cut through the numbness of fear that had suffused her.

'So, what?' she said at last. 'These visions are how Mr Bill marks whoever's taking over the business?'

'I don't know which way round it is.' Frank stared into his own mug. 'Might be that he gives the dreams to whoever he decides should be next in line, or it might be that some people are already more able to do it than others and he's drawn to that.'

'Did he choose me? Or was it you?'

'Not me. I wanted to keep it in the family.' Frank seemed distant, almost staring into space. 'But there's not many of us left, and the two of you don't have it.'

Xen didn't react, but a sadness passed over Mary's face at this, and Diya realised that, awful as the truth was, something inside her was hurt that she wasn't as sensitive as she'd always secretly hoped.

'And I have this ability.'

'He told me just after we were done cleaning up after your friend. I think he was happy about it, but I never could tell with his moods. Always with that damn smile. But he had it all figured out. Can't say I was keen, but Xen seemed to like you, so … I made the offer.'

'Don't you fucking dare,' Xen spat. 'Don't you fucking dare put this on me. I'm so sorry, Diya.'

Diya waved her hand. It was too late to assign blame, she'd clearly been in Mr Bill's sights for a while. A thought struck her: was *that* why he'd targeted Angie? Was it Diya's fault she was dead?

'It's nobody's fault except for Mr Bill,' she said, trying to reassure herself as much as Xen. She tried to focus back on Frank's tale. 'What happened to Harry?'

'No idea,' Frank said. 'He stopped coming on jobs a few months after that. I didn't see him again.'

'Lot of people disappear working for this company,' Mary observed.

‘If you’re asking me whether Mr Bill killed him, then I don’t know.’ There was zero affection or regret in his voice. ‘If we did a clean-up on him, I wasn’t part of that job. I still remember him, but the forgetting doesn’t work quite the same way when you’re part of the business. There was a lot of turnover back then. My dad didn’t talk about it much, but I think the family was a bit bigger. Lots of politics over who was going to take over, people coming and going from jobs. Might be they all got killed, might be a bunch of them just cut us off when it was clear it was going our way. No idea. They weren’t good people and my dad wasn’t exactly popular with ‘’em to start with.’

Mary and Xen stared at their father. Diya couldn’t imagine what they were feeling, but it was clear they were looking at him with completely new eyes. He’d been so compliant, willing to spend his life, his family’s lives, helping this awful thing. Did they really know him at all?

‘Did Mr Bill kill Mum?’ Xen asked suddenly.

‘I told you. No.’ Frank’s answer was hard and unambiguous.

‘You’ve lied about all this stuff, how the fuck can we trust you on this? She never liked your work. You were always fighting about it, then one day she’s gone.’ Xen snapped her fingers. ‘Like that. Was that the work of your good friend?’

‘Xen.’ There was a pure sadness in her father’s face. ‘You were only six back then. Must have felt sudden, I know. But it was weeks. Should’ve been months, or longer, but I talked her out of going to the doctor. If anyone killed her, it was me, so blame me if you got to. She’s not part of this.’

Diya shifted uncomfortably and took another sip of tea, suddenly aware of the painful history that surrounded this conversation.

‘She hated what we do,’ Xen said again.

‘And I guess she was right to,’ Frank said quietly. ‘Just not for the reasons she thought.’

‘Then why did you do it?’ Xen didn’t let up. ‘Huh? All this talk, all this bullshit. And you still haven’t told us the reason that you didn’t tell this evil fucking thing to go back to hell. What could he possibly have offered you? Was it all just the money?’

‘Not all. But mostly, yeah,’ Frank said, clearly aware of how weak it sounded.

Xen stopped in her tracks, blinking slightly.

‘Seriously?’ Diya said.

‘It’s not just money, it’s a whole deal, made before I was born. I don’t remember the exact wording of what we get, but it’s about security, stability. It’s about keeping you safe. The family of the one who serves Mr Bill will prosper and be protected. These days that mainly means money, although sometimes he’s been a bit more … direct.’

‘What do you mean, “direct”?’ Xen was unable to keep the disgust out of her voice.

‘Mary, when you were about four you were almost hit by a car. You ran out into the road before I could stop you, and this four-by-four came barrelling towards you. Then it stopped. It didn’t brake, it just stopped.’ Frank paused, as though watching something in his memory. ‘The driver, he got out. I don’t know if he was going to apologise or get angry or … He didn’t get a chance. His skin peeled itself off his body right in front of me.’

‘I …’ Mary looked shaken. ‘I don’t remember that.’

‘And you just let something that can do that near your family?’ Diya blinked in disbelief.

‘If it’s on our side.’

‘So, what?’ Xen asked. ‘You sold the soul of our family down the river for occasional protection and a bit of spending money? Seems to me like Mr Bill’s killed more Sloughs than he’s saved.’

‘You don’t know what it’s like to be responsible for the safety of your family.’

Now it was Mary’s turn. ‘Don’t give me that sad patriarch bullshit. You feel like we’re “safe” right now? How is working for that thing in any way safe?’

‘Safer than trying to break the old deal. Safer than being in his path.’ Frank shook his head. ‘Like we are now.’

‘That’s it?’ Xen was shaking. ‘Literally that’s all it takes for you to betray your basic humanity and start feeding people to this thing? What the fuck is wrong with you?’

‘Most of these people would have died anyway. They didn’t matter. Not like we did. Like you girls.’

‘Oh, that’s your excuse? Maybe they would have died anyway so I’m happy to help this monster delete them from existence?’

‘Not *happy* to—’

‘Well, boo-hoo.’ Xen was standing now, and all but screaming. ‘Sorry to hear it hurts your *feelings*. Christ!’

She turned around and stormed off up the stairs towards what Diya assumed was her room. Upstairs, a door slammed shut.

‘She shouldn’t be alone.’ Diya made for the stairs.

‘Give her a moment,’ Mary said.

‘We might not have a moment,’ Frank said. ‘When Mr Bill starts to wonder why the job hasn’t been done …’

‘He can’t make us do it if we don’t want to.’ Mary shook her head. ‘If he kills us all, who’s going to do it?’

‘Not all of us.’ Frank shook his head. ‘He doesn’t need all of us to get the job done. He just needs one of us to finish the cleaning. To help him digest.’

His gaze flicked to Diya.

‘How will we know when he gets here?’ she asked, ignoring his implication.

Frank let out a bitter, hopeless laugh.

‘Trust me. You’ll know.’

It was never completely consistent, the way it felt to meet Mr Bill. The first time Frank had seen him, a glimpse of an unknown figure standing (not sitting, he’d never seen him sit) in the living room of his father’s house, it had been a wave of vertigo, a dizziness that almost caused the then-teenager to go tumbling down the stairs. His father had been angry that he’d been up so late, and had answered no questions about the visitor.

When Frank finally saw the strange man again, years later, it had been a prickling of the skin; a horrible tingling sensation, as if every part of him had a case of pins and needles. He’d been working with his father’s company for almost a year by that point, and had just had his third waking dream: a reclusive photographer hanged by his own string of negatives. Each dream he’d been getting a clearer and clearer image of the strange being that seemed to stalk and kill these lonely, isolated people. Between the strange laugh and the smile that seemed to persist through every one, he was certain there was a connection.

After his initial swell of pride, his father had taken little direct interest in what Frank was seeing and hearing on these jobs, testily replying that, yes,

he knew what was going on and there was no need to keep wasting breath about it. It seemed that Francis Senior was, if not exactly sharing the dreams, at least seeing his own versions that made discussion pointless as far as he was concerned.

It was only when Frank talked to him about the figure he was seeing, the one that laughed, and asked if his father knew who it was, that he saw that odd prideful smile again.

His father just nodded. ‘All right, then, come on.’

Frank had said nothing as the two of them left in the middle of the job, moving quickly out towards the van that sat on the kerb.

‘Where’re you off to in such a hurry?’ Harry called from what had once been the darkroom.

‘Taking the kid to see Mr Bill,’ his father replied. It was the second time Frank had heard the name.

Harry whistled softly. ‘Good luck.’

For almost ten minutes they’d driven in a silence broken only by Frank’s occasional unanswered questions. His concentration drifted to the road, and he realised they didn’t seem to be going anywhere specific. The turns his father was taking didn’t seem to align with any particular route or direction, he just seemed to be driving. As the journey continued, though, the streets became less and less crowded. The brickwork on the buildings around them seemed older, somehow, and the shop windows ever so slightly grimier. After a few minutes of this, the road was completely deserted and the van rumbled to a stop.

‘We’re here,’ his father said, surveying the storefront they’d parked at. It looked like it had once been a Woolworths, but the sign was unreadable, the letters removed with thousands of tiny scratch marks.

Previously, Frank had been confused and a little uneasy. Now he began to be afraid. Inside, the place was as deserted as the street outside. Baskets lay in the aisles, as though people had simply stopped in the middle of their shopping, put them down and walked away. There was a thick layer of dust over everything, which exploded upwards in small plumes as the two of them made their way towards the back.

Behind the main store proper was a small, pokey-looking office. Faded notices and memos from whoever the manager reported to were stuck onto

a mouldering corkboard, and the cheap wood of the desk was covered in dusty invoices and inventories. Standing in the corner was what looked at first glance like an entirely normal man, the sort that it would be unremarkable to see on any street in London. He was turned away from them, facing the corner itself. There was no movement when they entered, and that was when Frank felt that awful prickling sensation.

Francis coughed quietly, as if not wanting to interrupt, and Frank realised his father had taken a step back so as to be slightly behind him.

‘Uh, Mr … Mr Bill?’ There was something in his father’s voice that Frank had never heard before.

The man in the corner rotated slowly towards them. To say he ‘turned’ wouldn’t have been quite right, as that would imply a degree of movement in his limbs that simply didn’t happen. His feet seemed to stay in place and there was no motion from his legs, it was only his upper body that pivoted around. His hair was as perfect as it was uninteresting, his clothes were old-fashioned but unremarkable, his skin was as pale as it was possible to be without looking sickly, and even though he found himself staring into them, Frank couldn’t have told you what colour his eyes were. If you’d asked the teenager how many teeth a human mouth should have, he couldn’t have told you, but he would have sworn that the grin of Mr Bill had more than that.

It was in that moment that Frank was certain that whatever he was looking at wasn’t human. The thought of a Punch and Judy show flashed into his mind, memories of watching that small wooden stage on the beach, of the limp puppets moved and flailed around by an unseen hand reaching in from somewhere you couldn’t see.

Hello, Francis. Mr Bill said. His mouth moved, but it didn’t quite seem to match the words being said. It simply seemed to open and close, as if on some sort of hinge.

‘I-I’ve brought my son, Frank. He’s been, uh, seeing you at jobs. So, he’ll probably be taking over. If that’s all the same to you.’

Oh, better than all the same, Francis, far better. Mr Bill moved over – again, Frank couldn’t have called it a ‘walk’ – until his grin was right in front of Frank.

‘Is—’ Francis Senior began to speak, but Mr Bill made a gesture and he went instantly silent.

Hello, Frank. How are you? We're going to be excellent friends, aren't we?

Frank couldn't bring himself to do anything other than nod slightly in reply.

Good. Good. Now, Frank, how important is your family to you?

'It's very important,' he answered hesitantly. Then quickly added. 'Sir.'

Mr Bill laughed at this, a breathless tittering sound.

"Sir." I like that. You want to make sure your family prospers, don't you, Frank? Like your father has, and his father, and his father before him.

'Y-yes.'

And you want your family to be protected from harm. Yes?

At these words, the dreams flashed once again through Frank's mind, the horrible things he'd seen this thing do to people. He started shaking.

'Yes. Yes I do.'

Then feed me the forgotten, Frank. Let me help to make this world cleaner for the living.

And Frank nodded, once again.

Diya knocked gently on the door to Xen's room. It was slightly ajar, and she could hear movement inside. On the front of the door, a sign showed a rainbow-coloured biohazard symbol, as well as stickers from a few dozen metal bands. All in all, it looked like it had changed remarkably little since she was a teenager. There was no response to the knock, and Diya pushed the door open gently.

Xen's room looked exactly as she had always imagined it: a big TV in the corner hooked up via a mass of wires to a half dozen video game consoles of varying generations; shelves covered in comics, DVDs and figurines from media franchises Diya only half-recognised; and lots and lots of black. She saw Xen next to her unmade bed, crouched in front of a small cabinet that served as a bedside table. Her friend slammed the cabinet shut as she heard Diya enter, but inside she caught a glimpse of assorted bits of paper as well as something that glinted like metal and, she would have sworn, a small ceramic duck.

'Jesus, don't you knock?'

'I did.'

'Oh,' Xen said, the fight leaving her. 'Sorry, guess I didn't hear.'

‘You OK? Everyone’s worried about you.’

‘Yeah, I just needed some space. They don’t need to worry.’

‘Sure, it’s just that there’s a good chance there might be a supernatural monster coming to kill us all, so …’

‘Right now, I’d rather that than spend more time with my dad.’

‘I don’t think you mean that,’ Diya spoke carefully. ‘I don’t fully get what’s between you two, but—’

‘Don’t give me that “they’re your family, you have to love them” shit.’

‘Oh, I wasn’t going to.’ Diya couldn’t help but laugh. ‘And to be honest, it sounds like your family is a lot more complicated than that.’

‘He’s not a bad dad,’ Xen said abruptly. ‘Not really. He’s always tried to be understanding, been supportive of me with gender stuff, even though he didn’t really understand, but … he’s also kind of an asshole. Y’know? At least, that’s what I thought before all this. Now I don’t know.’

‘Look, I’m not here to defend him. I just think it’s safer if we stick together and, right now, that’s my priority.’

‘Yeah, I guess you’re right.’

There was an uncomfortable pause, and Diya found her eyes drifting to the cabinet behind Xen. It must have been a little bit too obvious, as Xen gave a small grunt of irritation.

‘You saw that, then?’

‘I wasn’t trying to be nosy.’

‘But now you are?’

‘Kinda, yeah,’ Diya said. It far was too late to play it cool.

‘I’ve been … you remember Mary mentioned my “souvenirs”? Well …’ She gestured behind her. Only stuff I know is going to get thrown away anyway. It’s mostly letters and that, nothing valuable. Just never felt right to let these people be completely forgotten. Ironic, I guess.’

‘No,’ Diya said, something almost like an idea prickling at the back of her mind. ‘I’m very glad they’re here.’

‘What happened to Uncle Dave?’ Mary’s question seemed to come out of nowhere, but it was clear she’d been mulling over it for some time.

‘He was never happy with me taking over the running of the business. Thought we should do it together as partners. I tried to explain that wasn’t how it worked, wasn’t down to me or my choice, but he didn’t care. And

when he found out that George was going to be taking it over when I went and not him, well, he wanted to complain. And he took his complaint to Mr Bill.'

'And that's when he went missing?' Xen had calmed down some, but was still visibly furious. 'You should have told us.'

'"Went missing." Yeah, I guess so. Worst part is I took him there.' Frank shook his head. 'He couldn't even have got there alone. Only the ones Mr Bill has connected to can find him. You just drive and drive and intend to visit him and eventually there he is. Other than that, you've got to wait for him to come to you. But Dave wouldn't be satisfied, wouldn't shut up until I took him to make his case.'

'And Mr Bill killed him?' Diya was shivering slightly. The house had been growing gradually colder over the last half hour. It wouldn't be long now. 'How?'

Frank's eyes unfocused slightly and he stared into the middle distance, then he looked straight at Diya.

'Doesn't matter. It's not something you want to hear. But that thing wanted to teach *me* a lesson with it. Took a very long time to finish it.'

He stood up suddenly. 'No, I'm done talking. Not going to watch it happen to all of you as well. It's not going to happen again. Come on, I've told you what you need to hear. We need to get back to the job.'

'Sit down!' Xen snapped and, surprisingly, her father complied immediately. 'Let's be clear. We're not going back to work.'

'Fine. You want to know what happened to Dave?' Frank was shaking, the memory threatening to overwhelm him. 'Mr Bill pulled him apart, one layer at a time. First skin, then fat, then muscle and bone. It took hours.'

There was a long silence as the thought lingered. Mary's breathing had become uneven.

'We can still go back to work,' Frank said, with a last, desperate hope that this might have convinced them. But nobody moved.

'It's not your choice anymore.' Mary's voice was clear. 'You dragged us into this mess, you and all the others before you. You never once tried to get us out. But whatever happens to us from now, that's on us. I make my own choices and if I die it's because of me, not to punish you. It ends with us.'

Nobody disagreed.

'I can't lose you,' Frank said, almost inaudibly. 'Not like George.'

Looking at George's body was nothing like looking at his father's had been. It wasn't even like looking at the twitching remains of his brother, even though he knew the same being was responsible for both deaths. What had been done to Dave was a punishment, an abject lesson for Frank in questioning his family's awful guardian. Looking at George, at the clean break in his neck, he understood that it had been quick, even regretful. It was a killing that had been performed because Mr Bill needed his son to be dead, and for no other reason.

Deep down, Frank had known it was coming. Almost from the moment he had presented George to the thing he was going to serve, he had known it wasn't going to work. Mr Bill had been at his most cordial, so close to human that there was little distress in the encounter beyond a vague disquiet, and yet George's expression had immediately turned to one of disgust. These feelings only grew as Frank had tried, with some difficulty, to explain the situation, the relationship between the creature and their family. But George simply shook his head.

'No,' he had said.

That single syllable scared his father more than any encounter with the smiling thing before them ever had. Then George had turned and left.

There was no change in Mr Bill's smile, and it said nothing as Frank muttered assurances that he'd talk to the boy, make the situation clear, the refusal probably wasn't final, he'd come around. But even then, he knew what was going to happen.

He had talked to George, at length, and warned him about what might happen if he didn't change his mind. He'd been chosen like all the others before him and it wasn't the sort of tradition you broke without feeling the consequences. But if there was one thing George had inherited from his father it was stubbornness, and no words or threats or explanations were going to change his mind. The most he would agree to was not to tell his sisters. He'd thought he was protecting them and, in a way, he was.

It was never clear to Frank exactly how the gift (if you could really call it a gift) worked, how it was passed on, or exactly what relationship it had to Mr Bill, but he was absolutely sure that Mr Bill would not let someone who possessed it simply walk away. He had hoped that George's position as the only one in the family besides himself to have it might offer some protection. Perhaps the horrid smiling thing needed him too much to simply

kill him? It was a doomed hope, and one that had only caused him more pain when the end finally came.

Even so, it took until they were cleaning George's flat for him to break. He wouldn't let Xen or Mary into the bathroom, couldn't allow any but himself to wipe away the smeared spatters of blood from where his son's head had hit the wall. There, once again curled in the corner of a bathroom, he had wept. He wept for his son. And he wept because it was finally going to be over.

Neither of his other children had the gift, so Mr Bill would find no other heir. When he died, whatever bond existed between the Slough family and their inhuman patron would be severed for good. He just hoped it wouldn't take too long.

I'm sorry this had to happen. Such a waste. Mr Bill had said quietly from behind him. Frank wanted to spin round and grab the thing by the throat, squeeze until his horrible fake eyeballs popped. He didn't turn to look at the thing.

'That's it, then. It's over,' Frank said, his grief cut through with a sliver of relief.

No. Not over.

'George was the only one could carry on the business, and you killed him. You said yourself the girls don't have the sight. You killed my boy, so now it's just you and me to the end, you old bastard.'

There was a moment of stillness. The air around Frank felt electric, and he couldn't tell whether it was a sign of Mr Bill's anger, or just the thrill of talking back for the first time in his life.

No. You are too old. Too full. It's so close. We need someone fresh. There are others out there with what I need. I will find one and prepare them. And you will train them.

'From outside the family?' The idea of bringing someone new into this nightmare sickened Frank, but there was also a part of him that prickled at the idea of bringing in someone else, that – after everything – maybe the Sloughs weren't as uniquely special as all that.

'I won't do it.' He tried to sound defiant.

Yes, you will, or the others that you love will come to harm. And not quick and neat like your son.

Frank had never had a particularly vibrant imagination, but in that long moment of silence it tormented him with the creature's words.

'OK, but …' He faced the grinning form of Mr Bill. 'This is the end of it. If I do this and it passes out of the family, the girls are safe and comfortable. You look after them the rest of their lives and they're out of the business. Agreed?'

If it were possible, Mr Bill's smile stretched even wider.

Agreed.

'Motherfucker,' Xen said.

'So that's it.' Diya shook her head. 'I never had a chance. You sold out before I ever met you.'

'I didn't know it would be you,' Frank said apologetically. 'I didn't even know who you were.'

'But you were happy to give me to that *thing*.' Diya tried to grab the anger and hold it close, but there was such simple sadness written on his face that it quickly faded away. She looked at Xen and Mary with a sudden uncharitable worry that knowing it was all focused on Diya might make them reconsider their own chances of safety. After all, she wasn't family. But they sat there, defiant as ever, and she couldn't help but smile.

'You did it for us,' Mary said bitterly.

Xen nodded. 'We didn't need it. We didn't want it.'

Frank said nothing.

'What did Mr Bill mean when he said it was close?' Xen's brow furrowed.

'What?' Diya said.

'Dad, you said Mr Bill told you "it was close". And you were too old and broken down and useless and all that. What did he mean?'

'I don't know. Only time he ever mentioned it.'

'Diya,' Mary said, 'you said this probably started around the early 1920s?'

'Yeah, why?'

'What if it's a hundred years thing? Like after a century something happens, like he gets released or changes or ascends or something? Maybe that's why he's so desperate to keep it going, why the jobs are getting more frequent?'

‘Could be,’ Diya said, it was the best theory she’d heard so far. ‘It doesn’t make a difference, though. I didn’t want to be one of his victims, but I’m sure as hell not going to be his stooge.’

Frank picked up his pipe and sighed. ‘He’s going to kill us all if you don’t.’

Diya looked at him, then at Mary and Xen. The fear was written clearly over their faces, but neither of them tried to talk her out of it.

‘Guess you’ve made your decision.’ His face was unreadable.

Frank struck a match to light his tobacco, but instead of the head igniting into a reassuring orange flame, it flashed with a nauseating indigo light, burning for only a second or two before dribbling down to the floor as a viscous black fluid.

Diya could taste something sour at the back of her throat.

‘He’s here.’

20

Mr Bill

None of them intended to run. All of them had made the decision to stand their ground, to wait for the arrival of their tormentor and face whatever fate might be in store for them head-on. And yet, as the windows darkened and the foul smell grew stronger and stronger, Diya could feel her resolve begin to weaken. In the corner, the TV burst into life with a pop, cycling between seemingly random channels and the solid blue of NO SIGNAL. The colours were all distorted, the reds turned to a sickening shade of puce, and the sound was so slow that it was impossible to tell what it was supposed to be. All of them were on their feet now, looking at each other for reassurance, but there wasn't any to be had.

Then there came a sound at the door. Three knocks. They were quiet and precise, and cut through the house like a knife. It was Mary who took the first step backwards, towards the door into the small garden behind the house. She might have simply been trying to keep her balance as her legs went weak, but it felt as though permission had somehow been given, and when the knocks came again all four of them turned and fled, scrambling through the kitchen and towards an escape that they all knew was hopeless.

Xen grabbed the handle and yanked it down, but the door didn't budge. Behind her, Diya could hear the smashing of plates and glasses as Frank overbalanced and his hand swept wildly along the countertop. She was all but ready to give up, when Xen swore loudly, apparently seeing the key still stuck in the lock for the first time, and turned it. The back door swung outwards and they piled into the garden.

It was a small fenced-off area about eight metres long and five wide, with a ramshackle shed at one end. All around it were fences that separated

the patch of overgrown grass and shrubbery from the surrounding properties. They could probably have jumped the wooden barriers, each of which stood just below head height on Frank, but something felt wrong with the whole situation. It was silent in a way that nowhere in London was silent. There was no distant rumble of traffic, no conversations drifting from surrounding buildings, no birdsong. Even the trees in the other gardens were silent, with no wind to stir their leaves.

‘Did our shed always look like that?’ Mary asked, although she knew the answer.

The small wooden structure looked damp and covered with ancient mould, and the rusty prongs of a rake stretched out through the decayed door like thin fingers reaching towards them. The black plastic compost bin that Xen had been so keen to set up six months ago shifted and shook slightly in place, as though something inside was straining to get out.

The houses around them looked no better. As though they had been abandoned for decades, with broken windows, crumbling bricks and, in one case, a clear bloody handprint pressed onto the inside of a pane of glass. There was no sign of anybody living.

Above them, the night sky had assumed the sickly orange colour of light pollution against heavy clouds, leaving the world around them well-lit, but with a sheen of unreality painted over it like a glaze. Diya looked at the others for guidance on where to go next, but their surroundings seemed to have made their will to flee wither away.

‘Frank,’ she said urgently. ‘Frank, where do we go?’

‘Too late,’ came the reply. ‘It’s too late for that.’

Behind them, the back door opened slowly, the previously silent hinges now creaking and straining through the thick rust of decades. The smell that had suffused the living room surrounded them, that thick earthy scent of something soured and long-dead. Diya gagged, keeping her breaths shallow, trying to convince her legs to move. After a few moments, they complied, and she faced the thing that was standing there, patiently waiting for its quarry to confront it.

Mr Bill did not bother to try to look even remotely human. Whatever was inside the distended shell of skin and hair writhed and shifted, leaving it looking almost like a child’s crude drawing of a person come to life before them. It moved towards them, the long grass bending away from feet

that didn’t quite touch the ground, as if straining to escape the encroaching presence. A thick drip, drip, drip of something oily and cold began to fall around them like a gentle, insistent rain.

Hello, said Mr Bill.

The voice that emanated from that figure, that bounced around in Diya’s head was … normal. Quiet, softly spoken, with a hint of an educated Oxford accent. It was the most reasonable voice she had ever heard, and he didn’t even need to move his mouth to use it.

Hello, Diya. Good to see you again.

A shrill ringing sounded in her head, a tinnitus that vanished when the thing spoke, and swelled to an almost painful degree when it was silent. Beside her, Diya could almost make out Xen swearing, cursing at Mr Bill, but the words themselves were lost beneath the whine.

‘What do you want?’ Diya cried, shouting though she knew the world around her was silent.

Mr Bill laughed, this one a harsh, grating sound like a cassette tape being chewed up by a machine, and she suddenly felt very stupid for asking. By now she knew the answer to that question perfectly well.

I want you to work for me. All you need to do is clean. It’s not so much to ask. Such a little thing, really. It always needs to be done. Even without me, it needs to be done. So do it for me and you will be taken care of. You and everyone you love.

‘Taken care of like you took care of Angie?’ Diya shouted, clutching her ears in pain. ‘Like you did George?’

If you decline. Yes. Mr Bill rippled. *The words are yours, not mine. You may decide their meaning. But you will work for me. You are mine.*

‘Why?’ Diya spat. ‘Why me? I’m not part of the family.’

It doesn’t matter. The blood never mattered. Only the job. The job must be done, and I need someone who can do it.

There was something in its voice. Something squirming deep below the calm, reasonable cadence of its words. An edge that almost sounded like desperation.

‘I won’t,’ Diya said, tears now flowing down her cheeks. ‘I won’t do it.’

Why? Mr Bill’s smile seemed to widen even further, straining the edges of what passed for a face. *The people are dead. Already forgotten. They are not worth remembering. You speed the process only by a little.*

‘They’re dead because you kill them!’ Mary yelled. The dark, slick rain intensified as Mr Bill turned its eyes on her.

And I will continue to do so whether you help me or not. You are not the reason they die. Your refusal will not save their lives. Your job aids the digestion. And if not you, then another will help.

‘Then you’d better find another,’ Diya said, lowering her head. ‘Because I won’t help you.’

Disappointing. I offer you much.

Diya didn’t reply, she simply dropped to her knees. The oily liquid felt like it was soaking into her, and she shivered. Looking round she saw Xen and Mary regarding her with a frantic sort of hope, as though they were expecting her to have some surprise scheme or last-minute gambit to fight back against the monster that regarded them with blank, lifeless eyes. But she had nothing, and as they each saw that reality etched into her face, resignation came over them as well. They were going to die. And no-one would ever know that they had even lived.

Very well. Frank Slough, we will find another.

Was it really so bad to be forgotten? It would spare her parents some grief, at least, and for how long are any of us actually remembered? Her life was not one to be recorded in any history books. She was never going to create any great work that would survive the ages. The most she could ever have hoped for was a couple of generations remembering her name, if not her face. What she feared was that it was not simply memories that Mr Bill consumed, but something more vital. She had found no place in her life for religion, but seeing a creature of such physical evil in front of her, could she really be certain there was no such thing as a soul? It didn’t matter, she’d made her choice. Diya closed her eyes and waited for the end.

It took her a few moments to realise that nothing was happening. She turned around, expecting to see Frank moving towards Mr Bill with a look of resigned obedience, but he had not moved. He stood there, dripping with the awful rain, still as a statue. His hands were bunched into fists and his furrowed brow left his eyes glinting out of shadowy hollows.

Frank Slough. We will find another. You do not have another choice.

The ringing in Diya’s ears died down until she could barely hear it, as Mr Bill focused his whole attention on Frank. He still just stood there, saying nothing, shaking slightly, though whether it was fear, anger, or the

biting cold she had no idea. Diya could hear the almost-rain drumming down relentlessly on the garden, causing the grass to shiver and die where it fell.

Finally, Frank bowed his head and took a step towards Mr Bill. Diya's heart sank as the towering figure of her would-be employer walked over to the thing that had controlled his entire life.

'Dad, don't,' Xen said, her words almost lost in the rain.

If he heard her, Frank didn't react, continuing his slow march towards where Mr Bill shifted and grinned in front of the back door. But as he approached, he sped up. His steps took on a more forceful, determined rhythm and he seemed to be building up steam as he half-raced towards the leering creature. Diya realised what was about to happen only a moment before Frank pulled his hand back, and it seemed like Mr Bill had no idea it was coming at all.

Frank's fist impacted Mr Bill's face with forty years of rage behind it. The violence of it was so intense and immediate that Diya half-expected it to be accompanied by a thunderclap. Instead, there was only a small, wet sound as the grotesque smile crumpled in on itself and Frank's entire hand and wrist disappeared into the impacted flash of Mr Bill's head.

'We quit,' he said.

There was a second of stillness as Frank stood there, the expression on his face gradually turning from fury to disgust at the strange limp body that now seemed to hang off his arm by the face. He gingerly pulled back his arm. *Like father, like daughter,* the thought popped into Diya's head.

Mr Bill remained upright, swaying slightly. Then, its head pulled itself upright, though its neck flopped at a slight angle, as if regarding its assailant quizzically. The face remained crumpled, though, the crater in the middle causing its smile to take on a horribly inverted quality. It seemed to be considering.

No. You do not.

The next blow was, if anything, even more savage than the first, slamming into the side of the thing's body and sending ripples of flesh and whatever else lay beneath its skin all through it. Frank did not make a sound as he drew back for a third strike.

Stop.

The hand froze in mid-air. Frank Slough stood in place, completely immobile, his eyes darting around. Diya could see the muscles straining to deliver another blow, to hit Mr Bill again and again and again. But he couldn't. There was a spasm in the thing's head as the smile righted itself and pushed forward to the front of its face.

That was a mistake.

Frank stared at Mr Bill, the knowledge of what was about to happen to him written clearly in his eyes. His jaw wouldn't move, but the words were still just about audible.

'No, it wasn't.'

Mr Bill smiled so wide that the corners of its mouth split, splaying into a garish crimson wound that bubbled and oozed. It reached out, its arms now long and jointed all along in ways that no longer even had an echo of human anatomy. It seized Frank around the throat and effortlessly lifted him off the ground. Diya could see what was about to happen in such vivid detail she almost didn't notice the sound of the others screaming behind her. Xen ran forward, trying to reach them, to somehow save her father and stop what was coming. But it was already too late.

The smile opened. Not like it had sometimes when Mr Bill had spoken, as if it were a ventriloquist's dummy randomly opening and closing its jaw a few inches, but all the way. It seemed to blossom like a flower of molars, splaying out in a way that left the rest of the head entirely hidden. It was all an open, gaping smile. And it went all the way down, yellowed and rotting teeth lining the inside of its impossible throat. The thing that was Mr Bill hoisted Frank up and shoved him in.

In Diya's imagination it should have been such a clean process, like a snake swallowing an egg. She had been entirely wrong about that. There was so much blood, gushing from the edges of Mr Bill's mouth and flowing down the front of the creature onto the dead grass below. Frank's legs kicked and flailed as he was chewed through and pulled inch by inch into the now-scarlet maw. If he was screaming, it couldn't be heard over the sound of ripping and tearing and crunching. There was another noise underneath all of it, something pulsing and rhythmic that almost sounded like choking, but Diya knew immediately that it was simply Mr Bill laughing with its mouth full.

She wanted to look away, to not be watching this, to not have this sight seared into her memory. Perhaps forgetting was a mercy, the thought flashed for a moment through a brain that felt entirely frozen. Beside her, Diya knew that Xen was motionless, her charge forward arrested by the utter monstrosity that they were witnessing. Mary was behind them, and Diya could only hope she had been able to cover her eyes. As Mr Bill finished its meal, a spurt of blood sprayed out, splashing across her cheek and arm. It was warm against skin chilled by the rain, the vibrant red of it garish amid the dead and faded world around her.

At last Frank's shoes disappeared inside the thing's throat, following the rest of the doomed man. Mr Bill closed its mouth, its smile reverting to its previous proportions. Its face was glistening with gore, but the teeth of its grin were once again white and pristine.

You know what happens when you leave.

None of them responded. Diya could hear Mary weeping behind her, while Xen's face had turned ashen, her eyes wide in rigid shock.

Now. You will work for me. I will not ask again.

'BASTARD!' Mary screamed, and charged forward. She had picked up a pair of rusty garden shears from somewhere and held them aloft. The long blades still looked wickedly sharp even through the dust and decay as she leapt through the air, bringing them down with every ounce of breath still left in her body directly towards Mr Bill's face. He lifted his hand and—

Mary was gone. Vanished. There had been no sound, no flash of light or anything to mark the disappearance except for the fact that the space where she had been was now only empty air. The shears tumbled to the ground, landing by Diya. Xen instinctively ran forward, clearly no plan, no thought in her mind except to try and see what had happened to her sister. She immediately realised it was a bad idea and tried to stop, to kill her momentum, but it was too late. Mr Bill swung his arm out and, just like that, Xen was gone as well. It turned back to Diya, who had stayed rooted to the spot, and stood there as if waiting for something.

'Where are they?' she asked, her voice flat with despair. 'What have you done with my friends?'

They are gone. You are alone. You have always been alone. You have no-one and no-one will care when you are gone.

She felt the weight of those words. He was right. Deep down Diya knew her parents no longer thought of her, that her words and pictures had vanished from the world and that nobody had noticed. Despair threatened to overwhelm her, but she realised that there was no longer any fear left in her.

I can take more.

There was a feeling in her mind, like slippery fingers rifling through her thoughts. Angie's face flashed briefly into her mind, and then it was gone.

'No!'

But it was too late. The pain was gone. The loss had healed. She knew that she had once lived with a woman who was now gone, and she felt nothing about it. And it was awful.

I can give it back. You can remember again. All is not lost. Your friends are still here. I can bring them back.

Diya tried to refuse again, but she didn't want to. She wanted to be warm again, to laugh with Xen and Mary, to remember the woman who had once been so important to her. She wanted the grief back. It took every shred of willpower left in her to speak.

'No.'

Refusing will not stop me. This is pointless.

'No.'

Mr Bill didn't answer. It simply stared unblinking at her and slowly extended its hand. There were at least three metres between them, but the hand hung there in front of her face, waiting for her to shake it.

How many times did she need to refuse before it just killed her like it had Frank? Vanished her like Mary and Xen? Or would it never do so, choosing instead to keep her here forever until her willpower had finally gone and she would do or say anything to leave? She could save her friends. But no, they had made their choice as well. Would they ever have forgiven her for doing this, even for them?

The oily rain around her stopped, and the world was silent. The only sound was her own ragged breathing as Diya's eyes combed over the garden, looking for any other option than the hand held patiently in front of her. She looked along the arm to Mr Bill's body, which was swollen with its recent meal, straining at the edges of the form it had chosen.

Behind it, something caught her attention. Two of the windows on the upper floor of the house were now illuminated, as though a faint and sickly

light had come on inside them. Diya was certain that they had been entirely dark before. She looked at Mr Bill's dead, glassy eyes, then lowered her head in defeat.

'Fine,' she said, extending one hand to meet the one in front of her. Another laugh came, one of triumph, but it was cut short as she grabbed the shears from where they had fallen and slammed them shut across the creature's wrist.

There was almost no reaction from Mr Bill as its severed hand dropped to the floor with a small wet plop, the stump leaking something that might once have been blood or muscle or some other human matter, but was now black and rotten and liquid. Mr Bill didn't seem to have entirely understood what had happened, and Diya had no intention of waiting, dashing forward and ducking around it, through the back door of the house and into the kitchen.

She didn't bother to close it before her. It wouldn't stop Mr Bill when it decided to pursue her and would waste valuable time. The kitchen seemed longer than it had been before, the counters covered with old mugs and chipped bowls filled to the brim with foul-smelling stagnant water.

This is foolish.

Diya ignored the voice and pushed through into the living room. The furniture was mangled, the cushions slashed and the stuffing thrown around the room where it hung in the thick cobwebs that covered everything and shook with scurrying activity. She tried to pick her way through the room quickly but carefully, craning to avoid touching the webs. There was a sudden conviction in her mind that if she brushed against any of them it would snag her and alert Mr Bill, leaving her easy prey. It was absurd, of course, she knew he was right behind her, but she listened to the instinct anyway. Diya was in a place where the normal rules clearly didn't apply, and she had a suspicion that trying to be logical might leave her vulnerable.

STOP. THIS IS A WASTE OF TIME.

The command was so loud it almost overpowered her and for a moment it seemed as if her legs would buckle, but she pushed it from her mind and continued moving forward. She reached the staircase, which stretched up and away from her, the carpets stinking of mildew and ravaged by moths. Diya climbed, testing each step as she did for the tell-tale loose or creaking floorboard that she knew would alert her pursuer. One by one she ascended

them, not daring to reach out and take the bannisters that ran alongside in a mass of jagged splinters and hungry-looking nails. How long it took her to reach the top she didn't know. She could feel Mr Bill following behind her, but she refused to look, as though if she turned then he would be there and it would all be over.

Finally, Diya emerged onto the landing. She should have been tired, but the fear kept driving her forward. She looked at the doors that surrounded her. There was light spilling from two of them, through the crack underneath. The nearest was what she believed to be Mary's room. On the door was a framed poster of a tarot card. When Diya had passed it earlier, it had been the Knight of Cups, now the defeated and bleeding visage of the Ten of Swords stared out at her. She took a deep breath and pushed it open.

The room inside was far darker than Diya had assumed it would be. There was just enough light to see by, but it came from a small green night light in the shape of a teddy bear plugged into one of the wall sockets. The bear's face, though plastic and unmoving, seemed to indicate that it did not enjoy being illuminated, cast as it was in a voiceless scream. The walls themselves were covered in old posters that were too faded and brittle to be identified in the dim light, and a huge mirror that seemed to regard the room like a vast silver eye.

On the other side of the room, the size of which Diya could not quite get her head around, was a bed. The covers were as faded as everything else, but what design she could make out seemed made for a child, with once vibrant hues and the images of candy-coloured butterflies. Lying in that bed, the duvet pulled up to her chin in terror, was Mary.

Diya couldn't quite make sense of the Mary that she was seeing. She was either looking at her friend as she had last seen her, an adult of twenty-three in a knitted dress still spattered with her father's blood, or she was a child who couldn't have been more than eight years old, dressed in *Beauty and the Beast* pyjamas. Which Mary she was seeing seemed to change with each blink, but both of them were huddled up in the corner of the bed, paralysed in fear, staring at the shadowed corner in the opposite of the room. Diya could feel the waves of dread rolling off Mary, and followed the young girl's gaze.

In the corner a humanoid figure crouched. Her first thought was that it was Mr Bill, having caught up to her, but as it moved it was clear that it was

something else entirely. Its form was thin and vaguely feminine, its frame covered with a billowing garment that might once have been a sun-dress. Its hair was long and thin and fell across a gaunt and hollow-cheeked face that seemed not to register anything in the room. It wasn't entirely there, and the pale shine of the night light played across and through it in strange refractions, as though it were made of glass. Moving across the room seemed difficult for it, and it swayed gently as it wandered through the space, its feet never quite touching the floor.

'M-mum?' came Mary's small voice from the bed. 'Is it you?'

The child sounded so lost and alone that Diya could feel tears prick the corners of her eyes, and in that moment she knew that she had nothing to fear in this room. By rights she shouldn't be here, and she felt a hint of shame as she realised how deeply private a moment she was witnessing. Despite this, she stepped across the room towards her friend.

As Diya got closer, the sensations and feelings she was receiving with Mary became stronger, and she felt herself begin to fall into the child's mind, like the visions she had experienced before, but more distinct from her own thoughts. As Mary watched what she believed to be her mother's ghost make its shuffling way around the room, she felt an awful, burning loneliness. There was a certainty that nobody in the house was thinking of her, and if she screamed then they might come, but only to call her a liar for what she was seeing. And yet there was no joy in seeing her mother again, no warmth from this horrible shade that wandered through the dim light. She missed her so much it hurt, but if this was a ghost it couldn't see her, it couldn't hear her. It couldn't love her. There was nobody for Mary in that place.

Was this a memory? It felt like one, at least at its core, but smoothed and changed and sharpened by time and revisiting. And, Diya was certain, curdled by Mr Bill. Whatever Mary may or may not have seen as a child, this place was not that. It was a prison, somewhere to keep her friend until Diya finally made her decision.

'Mary,' Diya said softly, reaching out and touching her on the arm. 'I remember you. I'm here for you.'

The effect was immediate. The child was gone and Mary sat on the bed as Diya knew her, blinking rapidly as if trying to dispel a lingering dream.

She turned her head, looking around the room without any sort of recognition.

‘Diya?’ The grogginess faded from her quickly, replaced with a cold suspicion. ‘Where are we? What’s going on?’

‘We’ve got to go. Mr Bill put you here, it’s …’

Mary’s face went hard.

‘Oh, I know what this is,’ she said, her voice laced with venom. ‘How *dare* that murdering … Oh, god, Dad …’

She staggered as their situation suddenly came into focus for her. Around them the room began to change. It was now much closer to what Diya had always imagined Mary’s room to look like, with an array of crystals laid out on the dresser and a lingering scent of incense in the air. It was still dusty and degraded, but it was no longer the child’s room of her memory.

‘How are we going to kill that thing?’ Mary asked, her voice resolute.

‘I … I don’t know,’ Diya said, torn between a renewed hope and the fact she still had no idea how to actually stop Mr Bill, if it was even possible.

‘Where’s Xen?’

‘Nearby, I think.’

There was something wrong. Something about the situation Diya was missing. What was …? Her breath caught in her throat as she realised the one thing about the room that had not changed. The ghost still floated there in the corner, and it seemed to be able to see them now.

‘Diya …’ Mary said, noticing it at the same time.

‘Run!’

They both bolted for the door as the shade let out a hissing scream and flowed towards them like flames along petrol. Its edges had sharpened into glinting razors that Diya was certain could cut them to shreds. Mary reached the end of the room first and flung the door wide as Diya felt something cut into her leg and try to pull her down. As she began to fall, she reached out in front of her desperately trying to touch the threshold. Instead, she found Mary’s hand, and felt her friend yank her out and onto the landing, slamming the door behind them. There was the sound of claws scratching wildly at the wood, and then silence.

‘You OK?’ Mary said, breathless.

Diya looked down at her bleeding ankle. It hurt like hell, but it didn’t look like it had cut too deep.

‘Yeah,’ she grunted. ‘I can keep going.’

Clambering to her feet, she scanned the remaining doors, pointing Mary towards the one with the dull yellow light spilling from beneath it. It was Xen’s room, although the corruption of the signage on it was less subtle than it had been on Mary’s. It had simply all been burned away, leaving nothing but blank charred wood and the faint smell of scorched human hair.

‘You ready?’ Diya asked, but before Mary could answer, the sound of rapidly creaking stairs came from behind them as something began to climb up. They exchanged a look and immediately fled into the room.

It didn’t look anything like Diya had expected. It bore no resemblance to the bedroom that she had visited only a few hours before. It wasn’t a domestic space at all, and seemed in fact to be the main area of a deeply unpleasant pub. The layout was reminiscent of the Penderel’s Oak, but smaller and more cramped. Everything was grimy and caked in a thin layer of filth, while the air smelled of stale beer, vomit and the cloying aroma of congealed cooking oil. Around the untended bar sat hunched and faceless figures, their every subtle movement sending out an aura of menace, while behind the bar were rows upon rows of bottles filled with unnaturally coloured liquids, all of which were cloudy or lumpy or ever so slightly squirming.

‘I don’t get it,’ Mary said. ‘I mean, it’s pretty nasty, but— Oh! There she is!’

She pointed excitedly to a booth along one of the walls, then shrank backwards slightly as her outburst attracted the attention of the patrons sitting at the bar. Diya felt it too, the pure hostility in the blank flesh where their eyes should be. Mary pointed again, less energetically this time, to the place where Xen sat, shrunken in on herself, cradling a glass of stagnant water. They moved quietly towards her, being careful not to jostle anyone in the cramped space or say anything that might break the oppressive background hubbub of blurred conversation.

As they got closer, Diya noticed a big table just next to Xen where a half-dozen bearded men in stained T-shirts sat. In the middle of them lay an arrangement of black and white game cards that seemed to twist and writhe on the table. One by one they took a card and placed it on the table, and said something. The words themselves were slurred and garbled, but Diya still felt them like a punch to the gut, and each time they were followed by a

roar of cruel laughter that bellowed out and echoed through the pub. Diya saw Xen wince each time, and reflexively go to take a sip of her drink, bitter though it was.

‘Seriously?’ Mary muttered. ‘This is her memory prison? Being excluded from games night?’

‘That’s not it,’ Diya said, though she couldn’t easily put it into words.

Xen was so alone. Forgotten and unnoticed, but more than that, desperate to remain so. She needed so badly to not be a part of this situation, to simply sit there and endure the pointed laughs that drifted over to her. There was a part of her that wanted so deeply to be a part of that table, to play and be happy, but if anyone in this place became aware of her presence, if they remembered that she was real, she did not know what would happen. She only knew it would be cruel.

Diya began to reach for her, but Mary grabbed her hand.

‘If we wake her up like you did me, are all these … people, are they going to turn violent as well?’

It was a reasonable point. In Mary’s room there had been a single thing chasing them. There were many, many vicious-looking drinkers in this bar, most of them positioned between Xen and the entrance.

‘I don’t know. Maybe? I mean, what do you want to do? We can’t just leave her here.’

‘I …’ Mary looked around them, apprehension written across her face. She was obviously looking for another solution, but as another wave of Xen’s anguish rippled through Diya, she knew there wouldn’t be one.

At that moment there was a knock at the door to the pub. As one, the patrons turned towards it. The entrance wasn’t locked, Diya was sure of that, and this place already belonged to Mr Bill. It wasn’t asking to come in. It was announcing its arrival. They were out of time.

‘Xen,’ Diya said, grabbing her friend’s hand. ‘It’s me, it’s Diya, we’re here. You’re not alone.’

There was a shudder through Xen’s arm as her eyes slowly focused. She seemed groggy, coming out of her stupor only gradually.

‘Come on,’ Mary said, grabbing her by the shoulder. ‘We don’t have time for this. You’re Xen, you’re my stupid self-absorbed sister and we need to get out of here.’

‘Shut up, Mary,’ Xen said, seemingly on reflex. Then her eyes shifted to her sister’s face and she smiled. There was a moment of recollection as it all suddenly rushed through her and she gasped.

‘Xen?’ Diya leaned in. ‘You all right?’

‘Yeah,’ came the reply. ‘I think so.’

Around them, the bar disintegrated. The drinkers and gamers and other denizens stared at them with a seething hatred that Diya could feel in her bones, but then they crumbled and faded like the rest of it. They stood in the much smaller confines of Xen’s bedroom, or at least the burned-out shell of it.

‘What did that fucker do to my room?’ she hissed.

‘I think you can ask him yourself.’ Mary’s voice was small.

They turned to see Mr Bill standing in the doorway. He looked more distorted than ever, having discarded any attempt at a recognisable human shape almost completely. Diya’s mind tried to count how many limbs he had now, or exactly where the torso ended and the smile began, but to attempt it made her feel like a migraine was about to hit. The thing moved slowly towards them, taking up more and more of the room as they backed up against Xen’s bed. It was huge. Bulging and straining in a way that made Diya think of a spider’s egg sac or a cocoon.

Your efforts mean nothing. You cannot leave. You cannot escape. You cannot save your colleagues. I will kill them and then you will be alone.

‘No,’ Diya whispered. ‘Not alone. Not anymore.’

An arm shot out towards Mary, who stepped back, losing her balance and slamming into the old cabinet behind them. The hand wrapped itself around her leg, and the smile widened, as it had for Frank.

The room seemed to grow darker. Outside the window the thick rain had begun to fall again, rattling against the window with astounding ferocity. The bulb above them fizzed and flickered, and Diya could feel something warm and wet leaking from the corners of her eyes that might have been tears or might have been blood. Mary was breathing fast, hyperventilating as she looked into the chasm of teeth that was readying to consume her. Diya’s hand felt around her, desperate for a knife or some scissors or just something heavy that might give them a chance to fight back, to get a little bit more time before the horrible force that called itself Mr Bill finally ended their doomed resistance.

This is your last chance. All I ask is one job. A single task and you are free.

The creature sat there, bulging and leaking its old and rotten viscera, which pooled beneath its body, marking the scorched carpet in an ever-spreading stain. It was waiting for her answer. It didn't pull Mary any closer, but continued to slowly unfold its teeth. Something wasn't quite right here. What did it mean, a single job? Was it changing the terms to try and convince her? That didn't seem right. And besides, who would they even be cleaning up after now?

An idea struck her, and Diya found herself actually struggling to keep a small, wicked smile off her face. Her hand reached backwards to touch the wooden handle behind her.

'I thought you said you weren't going to ask again,' she said, her voice taking on a slight mocking edge.

'Diya,' Mary hissed, trying in vain to pull the hand off her ankle, 'what are you doing?'

Irrelevant. Do you wish them to die?

'No.' Diya shook her head. 'But you could have killed them just as easily before. And you didn't. You sent them away. And you haven't killed me either. Maybe we're not quite so easy to replace?'

'I don't think it cares,' Xen said, on the edge of panic. 'It seemed pretty happy to kill Dad.'

'Yeah, but you were going to do that anyway, weren't you, Bill? Maybe not in quite such a spectacular way, but that's how this works, isn't it? These visions that we have, they're not just some by-product, they're the last memories you consume. Waiting inside us until you come to collect. And for that to work you need us to do our job and clean up after Frank. Cut *his* last connections.' *And then eventually the same thing would happen to me, the next link in the chain.*

You understand nothing.

'I understand that you can't just find someone else to do it.' Diya was talking faster, the creature's reaction making her certain she was on the right track. 'Because something's coming, right? Not just the next link in the chain, but something else. You're so close to … what? What have you been waiting a hundred years for?'

There was no response from Mr Bill. Mary and Xen looked at each other, the slightest twang of hope breaking through the fear.

‘What is it? A release from some debt? A metamorphosis into something else? Or are you going to spit out a hundred baby Bills all over London?’

Enough. You cannot stop our Becoming.

‘Can’t I? I don’t think you were telling the truth about the blood not being important. You’re bound to it. You need someone who sees the visions and someone with Slough blood, and you need us to do our job. Otherwise you’re stuck like this. And I don’t think you want that. All we need to do is keep saying no.’

The anger in the swollen bloody thing before them was palpable, and Diya could feel its nauseating rage pulsating through the air, rising to an impossible pitch like a Shepard tone. Five seconds passed, then ten, then a whole minute as the grim stalemate became apparent. Finally, the roiling mass of Mr Bill settled for a moment.

You are right. The response came at last. *But I do not need both of them. Choose.*

‘No,’ Diya repeated. ‘It won’t change anything.’

Another pause. She could feel the fury rolling off Mr Bill in waves. Then he seemed to make a decision.

Very well. If your refusal is final then your living or dying will not change what happens. You were right. I was always going to kill you eventually and consume the memories you carry. But if you will not work then there is no reason to wait. And no reason for your death to be quick.

The hand around Mary’s ankle gripped tight again and pulled as Mr Bill’s smile opened up fully, as it had with Frank. Diya and Xen lunged at her, grabbing her by the arm and shoulder and trying to hold her. They strained and pulled, but it was no good. Xen let out a cry as all three of them slid across the floor towards Mr Bill’s gnashing jaws. Diya reached out with her other hand, frantically trying to grab something for purchase. Her fingers found the handle to the wooden cabinet that sat next to Xen’s bed, still somehow firm and solid despite its scorched appearance, and its little door swung open.

The effect was immediate. The sight of the things inside, Xen’s eclectic mementos, whole and undamaged, sent a ripple through Mr Bill’s grotesque

body and it recoiled. A surge of hope ignited in Diya's body. It was working.

What are those?

'Just a few work souvenirs,' Xen said, her eyes bright as she felt the tables turn. 'A little something to remember them by.'

'Didn't you feel it?' Diya felt her own mouth curl into a smile. 'That your meals weren't quite complete? That there was something missing?'

No. This isn't possible.

Diya reached out and grabbed a small ceramic duck, painted in a clumsy green by a child's hand.

STOP. PUT IT BACK.

She held the duck that Alan Mitchell's daughter had once made him close to her chest, feeling memories ripple through her mind as though pulled from the mass in front of them.

There was a noise like tearing cloth as something in Mr Bill split. It didn't scream, exactly, because there was no sound to what it did, but the sensation of agony, of overwhelming wrongness, took Diya's breath away. Next to her she could see Mary with the *Star Wars* drinking cup that she knew had once belonged to Ruramai Mariga, holding it in front of her like a tacky plastic talisman.

The image was absurd, but the pain that pulsated out of Mr Bill was very real. Parts of its form seemed to shrink and deflate, and the gore that flowed from the splits and rips in its flesh began to take on a more vivid hue, as though the blood were becoming fresher.

Xen grabbed Joshua Bryce's old fridge magnet, the word NAPLES still just about visible. The whole mass of Mr Bill was now shaking violently, as though whatever was inside it had begun to boil and bubble. Diya reached inside for something else, another small artefact to drive off the thing that wanted to render human lives meaningless.

NO.

It charged towards them, its colossal frame cascading along the floor with the inevitability of a freight train, the boards beneath them bowing and splitting under its weight. The front of it split open into a churning mass of teeth and darkness large enough to swallow them all. She heard Mary and Xen gasp, preparing themselves for the end, but still her hand moved around the cabinet, desperate for anything that might—

Her hand settled around something cold and smooth and familiar. She didn't even need to see it to know that small grey stone, unremarkable in every way except for what it had done for her so many years ago. In that moment Diya couldn't even feel anger at Xen for having taken it, because the warmth and companionship that she felt as the pebble slipped so perfectly into her hand wiped away any feeling except love.

'Angie,' she whispered. 'I remember. Thank you.'

Diya spun around and released it with a small flick of her wrist. Like she was casting a stone out to skip gently across a still lake surface and, for a moment, everything felt quiet and calm, the fear and uncertainty melting away. The pebble sailed through the air, meeting the undulating form of the creature as it was about to land on top of them.

And Mr Bill burst.

There was no fanfare, no dying scream or glowing light building up to a spectacular explosion. It simply popped, as though an overstuffed balloon had been pricked by a needle. One moment the mass of flesh and teeth and hatred was looming over them, the next it was gone, replaced by a spray of thick black gore and tarry innards that coated every surface with a horrible meaty splat. And then the only sound Diya heard was her own breath.

No, there was another sound. Birdsong. She slowly opened her eyes to see the sun streaming through the window of Xen's room. The light had a nasty reddish tinge to it, owing to the remains of Mr Bill that now coated the lower part of the glass, but the winter's day outside was bright and clear and normal.

'Xen?' she said painfully. 'Mary?'

A pair of groans sounded from either side of her. Diya tried to turn her head to look at them, but her whole body felt bruised and her muscles protested so much that she abandoned the effort.

'Is it over?' Mary said, barely audible. 'Is he gone?'

'I guess,' Diya replied, shaking slightly as the adrenaline left her body. 'I think we're back.'

She paused and took a deep breath. The bloody remnants of the thing stank, but the air itself seemed cleaner than it had been before.

'I think we're OK.'

'Not all of us,' Xen said quietly, and for a moment she and Mary held each other, letting their newest loss sink in, and Diya could only hope it

would be their last for a long time.

‘Oh god,’ Xen grunted, wiping away the tears. ‘What the fuck did it do to my room?’

‘Don’t worry,’ Diya said. ‘I’m sure we can clean it.’

Epilogue

The Slough Family Job

Winter was finally easing up by the time they had finished cleaning up the last remnants of Mr Bill from Xen's old room. It had been a slow process, and one that had been marked by throwing away a lot of treasured possessions and decorations that had been hopelessly contaminated, but it was almost done. Diya was scrubbing away at one of the few remaining stubborn spots on the now-bare floorboards, while Xen stared out of the window, down onto the back garden.

'Knock, knock,' Mary said, pushing open the door with her shoulder as she came in with three cups of tea.

'Oh, brilliant, thank you.' Diya smiled, gratefully accepting the mug and placing it on the floor next to her.

Xen didn't respond, her gaze still wandering to the greenery below. Mary placed the tea carefully on the windowsill next to her.

'Thinking about Dad again?'

'Always a bit, I guess,' Xen said after a second. 'I think the grass might be dying.'

Mary joined her at the window, looking at the patch of ground where their father had died, trying to decide if that section of it was really turning slowly brown or if it was just their imagination. There had been no evidence of his death left when they had returned from whatever version of reality Mr Bill had inhabited; no bloodstains on the grass or shreds of clothing. Nothing to indicate he had ever been there at all. The only things that seemed to have passed into the real world were the gory remains of Mr Bill.

It had made dealing with the loss both more complicated and easier. They had reported Frank missing with little real concern that anyone would suspect foul play (as long as they didn't invite anyone into what had been Xen's room). It had, in fact, turned out that he'd put the house in Mary and Xen's names late last year, though how he'd done so without their knowledge wasn't entirely clear. In fact, what affairs of his they could access without him actually having been declared dead seemed remarkably tidy.

'Do you think he knew?' Xen asked no-one in particular. 'That he was going to try and stand up at last?'

'I don't know.' Mary shook her head. 'Maybe when we lost George …'

'Yeah.' A sad smile crossed Xen's lips. 'We've all kind of been through the wringer, haven't we?'

Diya didn't say anything and continued to work on the stain in front of her, not wishing to interrupt. Truth be told, you could barely see the mark anymore, a testament to their skills, but there was a part of her that was reluctant to be finished with this final task, that couldn't accept the clean-up could be over when she didn't feel finished with what had happened. But she wasn't sure she would ever be truly finished with it. The nightmares came and went by turns, but often it was the days that were hardest, when her home was heavy with the dry air of central heating and she sometimes thought she caught a whiff of something rancid.

'Right,' she declared. 'I think we might be ready for the ozone machine. Going to take a lot to get it ready to sell, though. If you're still planning to?'

'Yeah.' Xen nodded. 'Fuck this place. Too many memories.'

There was a slight tension that passed between them as Xen realised her poor choice of words. They hadn't touched Frank's room since it happened.

'We'll be taking plenty of his old stuff,' Mary said reassuringly. 'I mean, we're not going to forget, but best to be on the safe side. You know?'

'Yeah.' Diya very much did understand. She still remembered how many times she'd made her parents repeat Angie's name before she finally accepted it, or how many of Diya's own childhood stories she had insisted they relate to her. 'It's a good thing you're doing here. Really it is.'

Xen shrugged, not turning around.

'This place was bought with blood money. Those people deserve it more than we did. Just wish we could have tracked down more of them.'

It had been hard, finding the families and loved ones of Mr Bill's victims, even now they had names again. He'd been careful to pick his targets, and many of them did seem like they'd been all alone in the world. Xen and Mary were planning to split the money from the house sale between those they'd found, at least those that were willing to accept what seemed like the generosity of strangers. They'd had a long talk about how honest to be with the families, and in the end had decided that trying to convince them of the truth would only make them less likely to actually accept the money.

'Any leads on where you might move to?' Diya stood up and stretched, her back making an audible popping sound at one point.

'Oh, yeah,' Mary said with a slightly mischievous tone. 'We reckoned we might move in with you.'

'With me? I …' It took a second for her mind to catch up with the words.

'You've got the space,' Xen said, lighting up a cigarette. 'And you were just saying how you were struggling with being all alone there.'

Diya expected to feel resentment at the imposition, at her friends simply inviting themselves to live with her. Instead, there was a strange gratitude, as though they'd stepped over a gap she couldn't bring herself to cross.

'Yeah, OK. But no smoking in the house.'

'Urgh, fine.' Xen rolled her eyes in mock protest. 'You better have a place out back I can use. I'm not being one of those smokers who hangs around out on the porch.'

'You can get to know Winston better.' Diya smiled. Then it faded. 'We'd, uh, there's … I mean, Angie's room.'

'When you're ready,' Mary said gently. 'We can take turns on the sofa until then.'

There was a comfortable silence for a few moments as Xen took a drag on her black cigarette. The winter sun played through the fuchsia of her current hair, and she watched as the tendrils of smoke coiled through the afternoon light.

'How do we move on without letting them be forgotten?' she said.

'I don't know,' was all Diya could say in answer.

'Do you think there are more of them out there?'

Mary was sitting in front of the space where the cabinet had been, watching it as though there was still something to see.

‘More like Mr Bill?’ Xen pondered. ‘Probably.’

‘I mean …’ Diya felt suddenly restless. ‘It didn’t feel like we were talking to … I don’t know, like, something all-powerful. I don’t think it seemed like it was something unique.’

‘Parasites,’ Mary said. ‘Feeding on the vulnerable, taking their strength from indifference and greed. There probably are more of them out there, aren’t there?’

‘Sure.’ Xen exhaled smoke. ‘They’re called Tories.’

Diya laughed at this, but it felt hollow. She knew they had all spent the time since that night looking harder at the people they passed at the street, feeling less safe being alone. Moving in together would help, no doubt, but it would never be truly enough. If there were other awful things out there, what could the three of them do to oppose them? Did they have a responsibility to try? Time would tell, she supposed.

‘Come on, let’s get the ozone machine up here. Sooner we get it started the sooner we can be done.’

Mary and Xen left the room, heading down to grab the squat black deodoriser. Diya watched them go, wondering when would be the best time to tell them she’d decided to keep working in trauma clean-up. As awful as working for Mr Bill had been, she had found some satisfaction in the job itself, and after doing something that actually had a real effect on the world, the idea of returning to the fluorescent world of spreadsheets and KPIs made her feel queasy. Maybe she could convince the two of them to stay on, keep the old firm together, make up a bit for the mistakes of the past. It could hardly go worse than when she had told her parents of the decision, she thought with a smile.

Diya turned to the faint stain on the floor, still just barely visible. It was dirty work, but someone had to do it.

Credits

Jonathan Sims and Gollancz would like to thank everyone at Orion who worked on the publication of *Family Business* in the UK.

Editorial
Rachel Winterbottom
Áine Feeney

Copy editor
Gabriella Nemeth

Proof reader
Andy Ryan

Audio
Paul Stark
Jake Alderson

Contracts
Anne Goddard
Paul Bulos

Design
Lucie Stericker
Loulou Clark
Joanna Ridley
Nick May

Editorial Management

Charlie Panayiotou
Jane Hughes
Alice Davis

Finance
Jennifer Muchan
Jasdip Nandra
Afeera Ahmed
Elizabeth Beaumont
Sue Baker

Marketing
Lucy Cameron

Production
Paul Hussey

Sales
Jen Wilson
Laura Fletcher
Esther Waters
Victoria Laws
Rachael Hum
Ellie Kyrke-Smith
Frances Doyle
Georgina Cutler

Operations
Jo Jacobs
Sharon Willis
Lisa Pryde

Also by Jonathan Sims

Thirteen Storeys

Copyright

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Gollancz
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

Copyright © Jonathan Sims 2022

The moral right of Jonathan Sims to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (eBook) 978 1 473 22880 1

www.gollancz.co.uk

This file was downloaded from Z-Library project

Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.

z-library.sk z-lib.gs z-lib.fm go-to-library.sk

Official Telegram channel

Z-Access

https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library